RANCH ROMANCES

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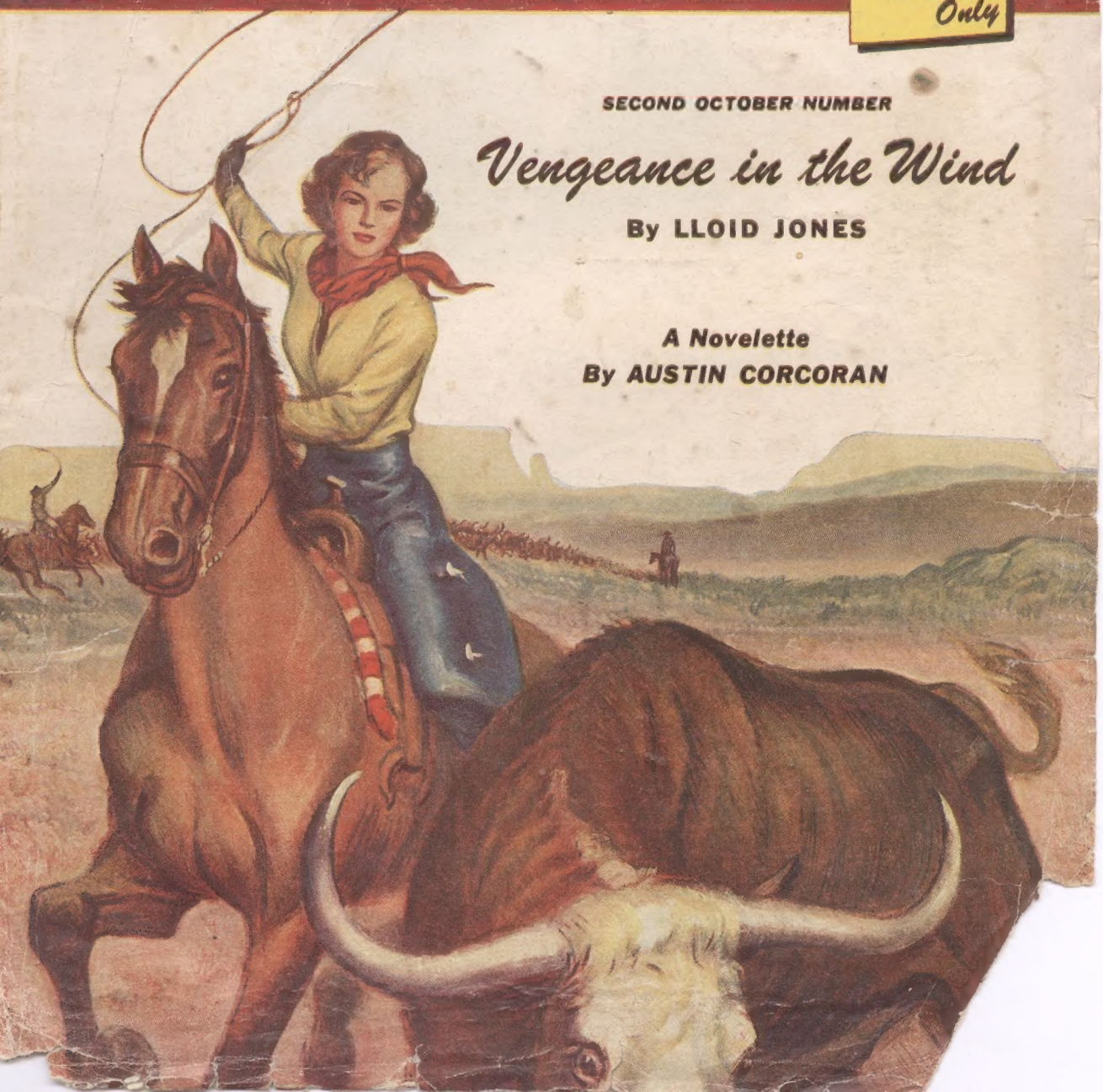
SECOND OCTOBER NUMBER

Vengeance in the Wind

By LLOID JONES

A Novelette
By AUSTIN CORCORAN



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RANCH ROMANCES

October 14, 1949
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TRAIL DUST

THIS DEPARTMENT will endeavor to cut sign on some of the colorful happenings of today's West and haze the stuff along to you—twentieth century trail dust, stirred up by folks in the cow country.

LIONS' conventions aren't as welcome in Santa Fé as they are in other cities. The state game warden there says they'll continue disbanding groups of mountain lions whenever they come across them. This was in answer to complaints of private hunters that the game wardens were ruining their sport.

WE SYMPATHIZE with the lady up in Vancouver, B. C., whose husband ate the middle out of their marriage license, and then threatened to make her finish the job. The judge who heard the story sympathized too—she got a divorce.

A PERSIAN cat we heard of in Wichita, Kans., disdains the company of other cats, preferring the companion of a fox terrier neighbor. . . . A vulnerable rattlesnake that attended a bridge party in McGrew, Nebr., was beaten off by several ladies with spades and clubs—the wood and metal kind. . . . Some squirrels with appetites for insulation are impeding the flow of water from Wichita wells, keeping the water commissioner busy—and nettled.

AN INSURANCE salesman in Ontario, Ore., complains that business is botched by a gadabout mother sparrow who built a nest under the hood of his car and laid four eggs in it. The man, besides selling insurance, not only has to open the hood when mama wants in or out; he has to wait for her to return before he can begin his rounds, lest the eggs chill. He's given his tenant fair warning, though, that as soon as the eggs are hatched she and her family are on their own.

THERE'S a gal in Seattle, Wash., who won a $25 bet with her uncle that she'd marry before she turned 25. He paid off, too—in nickels and pennies scattered through a barrel of sand. The diligent gal recovered her winnings after much digging—even collected the penny he'd held out. She showed lots of grit—and got lots under her nails.

THAT Hollywood hopeful who bagged the title "Miss Almost Everything" has a gorgeous pair of gams, among other things—but you'd never guess it. First two rôles before the cameras were in Westerns, with calico effectively shielding her nether assets.

ONE MORE argument for nylon, which needs no ironing, comes from Prineville, Ore., where a lady who was doing the family laundry had her hip grazed by a bullet. The gunman was a young lad who aimed at a blackbird. . . . Another misguided haul was made at Livingston, Mont., where a fisherman bagged a goose. He had quite an argument with his feathered catch before it released his fly and let him resume fishing for fish.

"Aura, I'm going to town with Manch. Will you go with me?"

CATTLEMEN fight for land, and sodbusters for their lives

—but dead men don't care whether they're law or outlaw

RIDING up to the sodbusters' camp, Link Deckers eyed his employer on one side and his foreman on the other. Did they mean to call for a showdown? Time was when big cattle outfits like theirs made short work of nesters. Short work, and violent. But now things were different.

This layout was shoddy, as such layouts always had been. Equipment of a new day: rattletrap combine needing the bats tightened on its reel, a tired tractor, rickety truck, some plows and a seed drill flecked with rust. Suitcase farmers, not homesteaders. Instead of a sod shanty, they lived in a paint-blistered house trailer. Mechanized, and so more deadly than ever.

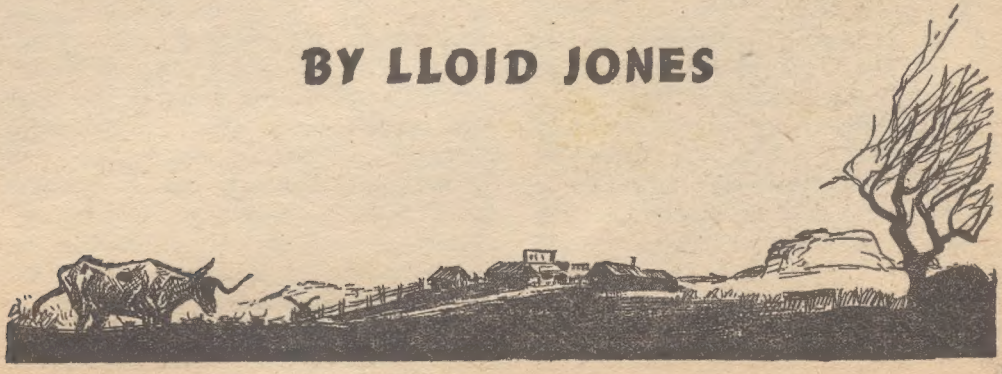
Well, Link was only a hired hand. He looked again, expectantly, at Manch Higbow, and waited for hell to pop. The Old Man was watching the sodbuster crawl from beneath his truck.

Link glanced beyond the sodbuster and came abruptly erect in his saddle, trying to alert young Ruddy Higbow.

"Quite a tractor they got." Link hoped Ruddy would see the feet of another farmer concealed behind the tractor, and the rifle which showed in a scabbard slung to the tractor's steering post.

VENGEANCE IN THE WIND

BY LLOID JONES



Ruddy said, "Yeah. Needs a good deal of work, I expect." Machinery, to Ruddy, was something to be adjusted.

"If I was you, mister," bull-shouldered old Manch boomed, "I wouldn't plant this land to wheat."

It was too late, then, for warning.

The burly young jasper came on with his thigh-swinging farmer's stride, dark face going deeper red. "I've leased a section and a half here," he growled, "and I'll do as I damned please with it."

Link glimpsed movement in the house trailer. Disgust filled him. They had a bear by the tail. What else could you expect, in these highly civilized times when a cattle puncher didn't wear a gun lest he "disturb the peace"?

"Maybe," Link put in, stalling, "we ought to introduce ourselves. This is Manch Higbow, owner of the HB-Connected ranch that lays down in the draw there, next to you. This is Ruddy Higbow, the HB foreman. I'm Link Deckers."

The farmer shifted his black gaze to Link and laughed shortly. "Sorry I overlooked the social angle." He raised his voice. "I'm Ote Garfield. This is my sister, Marie." The cool mockery deepened in his eyes.

FROM behind the tractor stepped a girl, and Link could hear Ruddy's breath, see his Stetson come off. The waves of her black hair shone in the August sun. She wore a shabby blue shirt and jeans, stained with grease and oil, as if she'd been working on the tractor. But shirt and jeans fitted snugly, offering little concealment for the curves of her full figure.

Link flicked his wary glance on to the house trailer. It was getting so he compared all girls to cool, slim Aura Higbow, the blonde princess of the HB-Connected domain and Ruddy's sister. So his concern now was possible danger in the trailer.

"My mother," Ote Garfield stated. The

woman appeared in the doorway. Gusts of hot prairie wind slapped her untidy print dress against her bony frame, reddened her hard features. "That's the size of our crew, Deckers," Garfield concluded amusedly. "We oughtn't to scare you. We're from Clark County, Kansas."

"Being new," Manch Higbow bulled in again, yet seeming to try for a show of reason, "you might not know these prairies are too dry for anything but cattle range. You won't get two crops outa five."

"I don't want two crops." The man Garfield allowed himself a grin that showed his teeth. "Only one, the sod crop. Ought to be enough moisture accumulated to make one crop. That'll net us anywheres up to twenty-five dollars an acre. After that you can have a deed to the whole cussed state of Colorado, for all o' me."

"We're wastin' time, Manch," Link stated, his eyes still on that rifle, and noting Garfield's cocky contempt.

Manch couldn't get it they were whipsawed. He argued, "Once you tear up grass enough, we'll have dust storms again. Same as the 1930's. Ruin the whole country."

"No great loss," opined Ote Garfield.

"I'm warnin' you," Manch roared, "you won't stay here if I can help it!"

Garfield shot back instantly, "You've made your threats. Now get out!"

As if at a signal, Maw Garfield reached down and then up, cradling a double-barreled shotgun. In one swift, fluid movement the girl Marie had the rifle from the tractor snugged against her soft shoulder.

"You look here!" Manch shouted.

But Link gigged a spur and came plung-

ing crosswise in front of the Higbows. "I been tryin' to get you to leave with a whole skin," he rasped in an undertone. "Come on." And he led the way.

Manch said thickly, "They got posses after the Daltons and the James boys, but these soil robbers will be upheld by law!"

"So," Link said in disgust, "we better not call their hand unless we hold somethin' better 'n a pair of treys."

"I don't know why we're so lathered," declared Ruddy. "I doubt this dirt'll blow much if it's properly cultivated with modern machinery."

"Machinery!" roared Manch. "All you think about is machinery and tinkerin' with that fool jeep o' yours. Why don't you give some time to bein' foreman o' this ranch once in a while?"

Ruddy's thinly handsome face flushed, and his wiry figure tensed. Link wondered why the Higbows couldn't do their wrangling in private. Manch's eternal blasting at the admittedly ineffective Ruddy sure didn't help the foreman's standing with the men.

"The ranch is still makin' money," Ruddy began.

Link asked shortly, "Want me to get back to the pumps?"

"Yeah. You better go check over and shut off to come in before long." Ruddy's management was usually limited to confirming orders Link suggested.

Link quartered away down the slope, and the quarreling voices rose again behind him. Link rode with eyes half closed against the sun-glare of the prairie, his brown face somber, galled by the taste of the fumbling mess they'd made of running off the sodbusters.

HE LET himself through a wire gate, and then another, and came to the dry course of Buffalo Creek. Here you got a good well at eight to twelve feet. Manch Higbow had drilled a string of such wells along a distance of eight miles, and had mounted each well with a centrifugal pump powered by a gasoline engine and irrigated alfalfa fields on each side of the draw. The rest of the HB-Connected was thick with strong native grass. Manch even had the scrub sage and the fat, low-growing prairie cactus culled out.

Link got down to shut off a pump and engine for the day. You could hand it to Ruddy for one thing—his mechanical skill kept these engines always chugging away, throwing their vital streams into the lateral ditches.

Out of the sudden quiet a low, musical voice asked, "Getting ready to start for the house?"

Link turned, and permitted his eyes to rest a moment on Aura Higbow. She was trim in the saddle, her sculptured features quiet, her hand sure on the reins. He knew, because she rode her sorrel cutting horse, she'd been working a herd at pasture, turning the weaned calves into one of the lots with a feed corral. Yet she was crisp and cool, and apparently unwearied.

"I'm goin' in now," Link answered her, feeling the pulse at his temples, "if you mean I can ride with you."

She regarded him gravely. "That's what I mean."

He mounted, uncertain how to take that, and turned west alongside her. He nodded toward the black spots of the sodbusters' camp three or four miles away, standing out in harsh relief against the vast glow of the sunset.

"We found some salty characters up there," he told her. "They don't seem inclined to leave."

"I suppose Grandad is hit pretty hard," she mused. "He has never got over his bitterness against the sodbusters who wrecked the country before."

"He knows these'll do the same thing," said Link.

"I'm afraid he'll get himself into trouble. He'll keep thinking back over those dreadful years when he had to rebuild the HB-Connected, squeezing out the money to buy twenty acres or forty acres, or string another fence, or drill another well. I think he feels he has practically a divine right to this land."

"He has," Link declared, "because he uses it right. He shifted over from runnin' scrub stock on open range to feedin' out

bred-up beef cattle. He got the plowed-over land back in grass, and fixed to irrigate where he cultivated. He's got everything a man could want here."

"I wish Ruddy felt like that about it."

"Sometimes," said Link, "a man's people show him the way he does not want to go. For myself, I've never had any yen to get into the Buffalo Mercantile. Kinnard is welcome to it, even if my folks did own it once. I can't forget what happened when they carried the sodbusters on credit durin' the first big wheat craze. I expect you couldn't blame the clodhoppers, when they'd see their crops goin' up in the black blizzards, for pullin' out and not payin'."

Link got down to shut off another engine, and Aura nodded. "It was pretty desperate with them. Some, I know, had to decide whenever they stopped whether they'd buy gas or food. By the time they gave up and left they didn't have enough for both."

Link remounted soberly. "Anyway, to me the grocery business means jobbers' salesmen dunnin' you for their bills, and sittin' by the hour in a back room stuffy with the smell of stale bacon addin' up money you can't collect, and a woman cryin' in the night."

"Yet you were fifteen," Aura reminded him, "and able to understand, a little. Ruddy was only eight and nobody to look after him but me, just eleven myself. We'd watch the dirt coming off the plowed fields all around us, where the sodbusters had taken up the open range. Mornings we'd find a layer of dust on the bed covers. And Grandad was prowling the place like a sore-shouldered bull, buying cottonseed cake to get what cattle he had left through the winter, whether or not we had anything but beans."

Link nodded. "Such things affect a man's decisions. After the dust pneumonia took my folks, I never wanted to stand behind a counter of my own. Whatever I did, I wanted it to count against the dust. I figured the best guarantee against misguided farmers was cattlemen. I promised myself some day I'd be foreman of a good ranch or have a spread of my own. That's the kind of life I want."

"That's the kind of life I want, too," agreed Aura.

LINK shifted in the saddle to look at her directly. "You may think it's no concern of mine, but I've been wonderin' for a long time if we didn't feel the same way. About that, and a lot of other things."

She looked at him, startled, and then became absorbed in dusting her saddlehorn with a gloved forefinger. Link thought, as he waited, that confusion gave added sweetness to her face.

At last she said, "I think you'd do very well at operating a ranch, Link. I know you've made some valuable suggestions to Ruddy. I appreciate that."

They rode in through the fading light, the low, rambling ranch house showing white against the thicket of locust trees that served as a windbreak on the north and west. Link was finishing a wash-up in front of the bunkhouse when Juan Pablo beat the dishpan.

He followed the other hands up to the house and took his place at the long table. Old Manch went at his food in grim silence. Ruddy, at Manch's right, glowered at his plate and stabbed with his fork. Aura, at her grandfather's left, toyed with her food, but did not look at anybody, especially not at Link. Well, she'd set the Higbows, and their troubles, apart from the likes of him. Right now the hands were better company anyway.

"Killed a rattler today," he remarked to Tex Moab. "Is it right they got two-headed snakes in Texas?"

"Nope." Tex didn't seem in the mood for a josh about his home state. "Only two-legged ones."

"Same as in Colorado." Old Jerk Nepesta spoke with some scorn.

"Slim, I been worried about you in this wind," Link continued. "I notice some awful heavy tumbleweeds blowin' away."

"I keep my shirt buttoned," returned Slim Hutley, "when she blows from the southwest."

Manch declared, "Before long that southwest wind'll be blowin' them sodbusters' dirt onto our grass."

In the heavy silence, the sound of somebody's fork against his plate was loud.

"What galls me," Manch went on, chisel-voiced, "is this politely waitin' around for 'em to dust us out while we set on our gun hands like we had frostbite."

RUDDY'S cup went into his saucer with a crash that shattered it. "You think," he demanded, shrill, "we can put on some show and scare that Garfield character away from the prospects of a quick twenty-five thousand dollars?"

"We sure don't want to risk lettin' any grease cups go dry while we find out," snorted Manch. "My Godfrey! The day of men in this country is past."

Aura tossed her blonde curls angrily. "That's not fair, Grandad. Ruddy means if we keep the HB at all, we'll have to keep it on the right side of the law."

"If you get sued or prosecuted nowadays," Ruddy elaborated, "there's more at stake than a sixty-foot lariat with a wide loop."

"Then what's your idea for gettin' rid of 'em?" shouted Manch, his bull voice rocking the room. "You ain't got one. Look who's talkin' about what's at stake! All you had gumption to do up there today was get an eyeful of that black-haired filly. You think that'll run 'em out?"

"I never noticed you start 'em runnin'!" Ruddy's face was scarlet. "And Link didn't exactly grapple 'em with his bare hands."

Link applied himself to the beef.

"That's another thing," declared Aura. "The days are gone, Grandad, when you could hire a crew that would shoot up any neighborhood you didn't like. These boys are not gunhands."

"No?" Manch retorted. "You think they don't know that if the sodbusters get started around us, they might as well draw their time?" He looked expectantly at the hands, but Link kept busily at his eating, and none of the other three said anything. "How about it, Link?" persisted Manch.

"Well," Link said, "I expect Aura's right—you can't afford to lay yourself open."

"See there?" Ruddy was triumphant.

"He's not finished," snapped Manch. "Then what's your idea, Link?"

"Sure," Ruddy grated. "Link's got an idea! Good old Link! Good old anybody, except Ruddy! Why don't you tell 'em you wish Link was your foreman!"

"Ruddy!" cried Aura. "Grandad didn't say Link was—"

Link kicked back his chair and came to his feet. "All right," he rasped. "You won't leave me out of it. So I have got an idea. So what?"

Ruddy was also standing. "Let's hear it, smart guy!"

"The Garfields are drifters. Poor folks.

"I thought cowboys fought

I expect nobody knows the ways of poor folks better than me. They can't keep goin' till they get a crop, without credit at Kinnard's store. You're Kinnard's biggest customer, Manch. Tell him to give 'em no credit."

"And what's so brainy about starving people?" Ruddy said.

Manch struck the table a blow that rattled the dishes. "That does it," he roared. "By Godfrey, there's one man on the place with some gumption, and I'm namin' him foreman of the HB-Connected now."

"Grandad," said Aura, breathing hard, "you mean Ruddy isn't your foreman—"

"I mean Ruddy can go fix all the damned machinery he pleases, here or elsewhere. It makes no difference." The old man sank back heavily in his chair, his weathered face seamed.

A stifled sob escaped Aura, and she started for the door.

"Now, wait a minute," Link ordered. "I had no intention—"

"—of stickin' your neck out," Ruddy finished with a humorless laugh. "Gonna be tough, not havin' Ruddy to blame. But I begin to see some points to machinery fixin'—elsewhere."

A sudden silence fell over the room.

with guns instead of fists," she said

HE TURNED and went out. After a second's look which Link couldn't face, Aura followed him. Link turned to see Jerk Nepesta standing with extended hand.

"Hi, boss," the old-timer grinned.

Slim Hutley came behind him. "I reckon I could blow *you* down right now," Slim chuckled.

Tex Moab looked at Link critically. "A Tejano is a trifle particular who he works for," the big waddy drawled. "I been thinkin' some of drawin' my time." Then he smiled broadly and gripped Link's hand. "I reckon I've changed my mind."

Manch said, "Link, we better get to town and talk with Kinnard right away. Tonight."

Link nodded. "I'll go get the car."

It came to him as he went out that now he'd be driving Manch around in the ranch sedan a lot. Planning the work on the place. Marketing the cattle. His sense of reality returned, and a fierce triumph seized him.

He was foreman of a good ranch—the best ranch he knew. Link Deckers had come up in the world the hard way, because he'd earned a promotion, and the men he'd be over trusted him and were glad. Would Aura see that, and accept it?

He heard her talking to Ruddy in the yard, and in the flush of his new, hard confidence he walked toward them. Their conversation broke off as he approached.

"Aura," he said deliberately, "I'm goin' to town to take Manch. Will you go with me?"

In the darkness he could not see her face, but after a minute she said, "Yes, I'll go."

She turned towards the house, and Ruddy walked away to the shed where he kept his jeep. Link went to the bunkhouse and changed to his good Justin boots.

After a moment's thought, he took the boots off again, shed everything but his shorts, and shaved quickly. When finally he went for the car, his close-coupled frame was decked in shirt and tie, his twill saddle-pants and the Justins, and gabardine frontier jacket. His good fawn-colored Stetson was well back on his freshly-combed hair.

Manch and Aura came out of the house together. Manch opened the font door and handed Aura in beside Link, then climbed in the back seat himself. Aura had changed to a simple green frock that was cool and soft-looking. Link, responsible for the driving, dared not let himself be too much aware of her.

He let in the clutch, and they hummed away across the rolling dip and rise of the prairie. A full moon was by this time silvering the big cottonwoods along the wash of Buffalo Creek. The wind, cool now with a strong, steady rush, was rich with the fragrance of cured grass. Link considered how soon that wind might reek of choking dust.

"Too much breeze for you?" he asked Aura gently.

"No," she said, and that was all.

For a man with a dream newly come true, Link reflected, this was a damned small celebration.

IN HALF an hour they topped a rise and saw lights ahead, and in another fifteen minutes they were rolling along the widening of the road that was Buffalo's street. Norm Kinnard had put a wind-charger on the store, so there were electric lights inside and over the gas pumps. Link pulled up in front of the familiar two-story building, and Manch got out.

"I won't be very long in here," he said.

Link went around to open Aura's door. "I figure," he said, "I have got some points to clear up. I'll try to clear 'em if you'll have a soda at the drug store with me."

Aura stepped out of the car. "I won't," she said, almost sadly. "I have some points to clear up too, Link, and it isn't easy. But I don't want you getting ideas—about us."

"I figure Ruddy had his chance," Link began.

"Would it make any difference if you figured he hadn't? You promised yourself all this, and more."

"What do you mean by that?"

"You said some day you'd be foreman—you got that through Ruddy. Some day you'll have a spread of your own—but you won't get that through me!"

Link stepped back as if from a blow.

She moved quickly past him and marched away in the direction of the drygoods store. Link stared after her, achingly aware of the dainty perfection of her figure, her utter desirability. In masculine helplessness, he commenced to swear under his breath.

Presently Manch came out of the store to find Link standing in the same position, swearing in the same undertone.

"Kinnard could see the point right off," Manch reported cheerfully. He looked keenly at Link, and followed the direction of Link's stare. There was nobody in sight, but Manch must have guessed pretty close to the truth. "Come on. I'll buy you a drink," he offered.

They set off together down the street, their bootheels rapping out the horseman's peculiar click-click-te-*click*. They came to the building that had once housed Daly's Barber Shop, and stopped short.

The building was lighted, and had a new coat of paint on the front, a sign lettered with gilt inside the glass: Great West Land Company—Wheat Tracts for Lease.

All this had happened since last Saturday.

"Well, I'll be a lop-eared, wall-eyed—" Manch began, and stopped at a nudge from Link. Aura, coming from the drygoods store, joined them, and the three stood silent, looking.

"I figured," Link finally growled, "we'd be up against more than the Garfields. Let's go in and see what."

THE MAN who emerged from behind the desk as they entered the office did not look like an enemy. He was forty-ish, and well set up, with good shoulders inside a dark business suit, and a smile that inspired confidence.

"Good evening, folks. I hope you're interested in wheat land." He had a pleasant laugh. "Bain is my name. Seth Bain."

Link said, "This is Miss Aura Higbow. And Mr. Comache Higbow. I'm Link Deckers."

The confidence-begetting smile disappeared. Seth Bain leaned carefully against his new light-wood desk, folding his arms. "The Higbows are from the HB-Connected ranch. You work there, Deckers?"

"Link's our foreman," Manch told him.

"I understood your grandson was foreman of the ranch."

"Not any more," said Manch briefly.

"You and your clients seem to be well informed about the HB-Connected," Link observed.

Bain shrugged, and his lips smiled. "Some cattlemen make trouble. It's wise to be informed about your opposition."

"The point is," rumbled Manch, "high-priced wheat, and the sodbusters that tried to grow it, ruined this country once before in my time. And you're dang right I'll put up a fight before I see that happen again."

"I know your reputation," Seth Bain agreed coolly, "and I'm prepared for your opposition. I've made the acquaintance of the county sheriff."

Aura put in anxiously, "I'm sure you don't understand, Mr. Bain. My grandfather has devoted his life to building this country. He was the first white child born in Comanche County, and he was named for it. Its well-being means a great deal to him."

"I understand," Bain returned coldly, "your grandfather has a deed to thirty-two hundred acres of this county, and a fence around it. Is his christening supposed to give him the right to dictate the management of the whole county?"

"That," Link commented, "makes a good sounding argument for newcomers—which we're not. Neither are you, or you wouldn't have thought of bringing these greenhorns in here as a quick way to make some easy money. I think you know dust storms can deposit an inch of dirt a month on grassland. I think you know what you and your land-suckers will do to this country. No man has got the right to do that to any country."

Bain smiled again, with his lips only. "The Indians maintained that the Manitou meant this for their hunting grounds. But I've got faith in the future of this country. I'm not living in the past. I've invested heavily in Comanche County land, and I intend to bring it into production."

"Why not bring it into production by makin' your leases for grazin'?" demanded Link, "instead of tearin' the heart out of the land. At a dollar a head a month, a year's grazin' fees would still be five times your heavy investment—made, no doubt, at tax sales after your kind ruined this country before."

"But, my friend," Bain smiled shrewdly, "the owner's share of a wheat crop will be twice the grazing fees."

"If, my friend," Link retorted, "the wheat matures."

Bain dropped the smile. "It had better mature! I've dealt with cattlemen before. And since you want to make this personal, every wheatman coming in here will be located next to the HB-Connected, I promise you!"

"That," Link snapped, "should make it easy to keep track of 'em. What I had in mind, though, was that we've had no rain around here since the eighth of July. You figured out a way to lay that onto the HB-Connected, Mr. Bain?"

Link turned on his heel, Manch and Aura following him out. They walked to the car in gloomy silence.

"Well, anyway," Link said as they turned onto the road toward home, "now we know what we're up against."

"That slick-tongued snake," growled Manch, "ought to be strung up. If the Garfields knew what he really brought them in for, we'd not have them to buck."

"We'll have both, Grandad," Aura stated. "Him and the Garfields. He'll keep a steady stream of sodbusters coming."

THE NEXT morning at breakfast, Link said to Manch, "I wonder how close Bain can come to carryin' out his threat to put a solid ring of sodbusters around us."

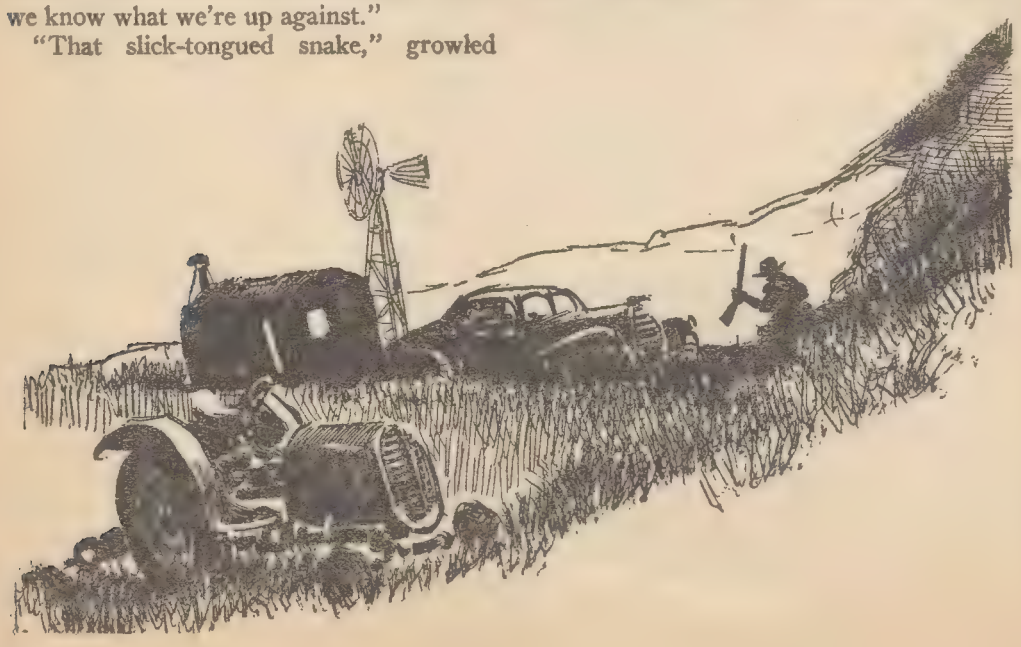
"What difference does that make?" snapped Manch. "The only language a slicker like that understands—"

"Grandad," Aura said sharply, "it won't help for you to do something rash and get into trouble with the law."

"It may not make any difference," admitted Link, "but I'd like to know. Can I go over to the county seat and find out how much land he has around us?"

"Go ahead," Manch grunted. "It won't matter what happens here if we don't get rid of the sodbusters."

Link rose. If Aura appreciated his acting as a brake on her Grandad's temper she didn't show it. When Link went for the pickup to go to town, Ruddy's jeep had been removed from its place in the shed.



In Buffalo, Link parked the pickup beside the station and looked at his watch. It was three quarters of an hour to train time. He walked up to Kinnard's store for a sack of tobacco.

Link was five paces from the door when Ote Garfield stalked out and turned his way. There was something in the farmer's scarlet face which caused Link to stop.

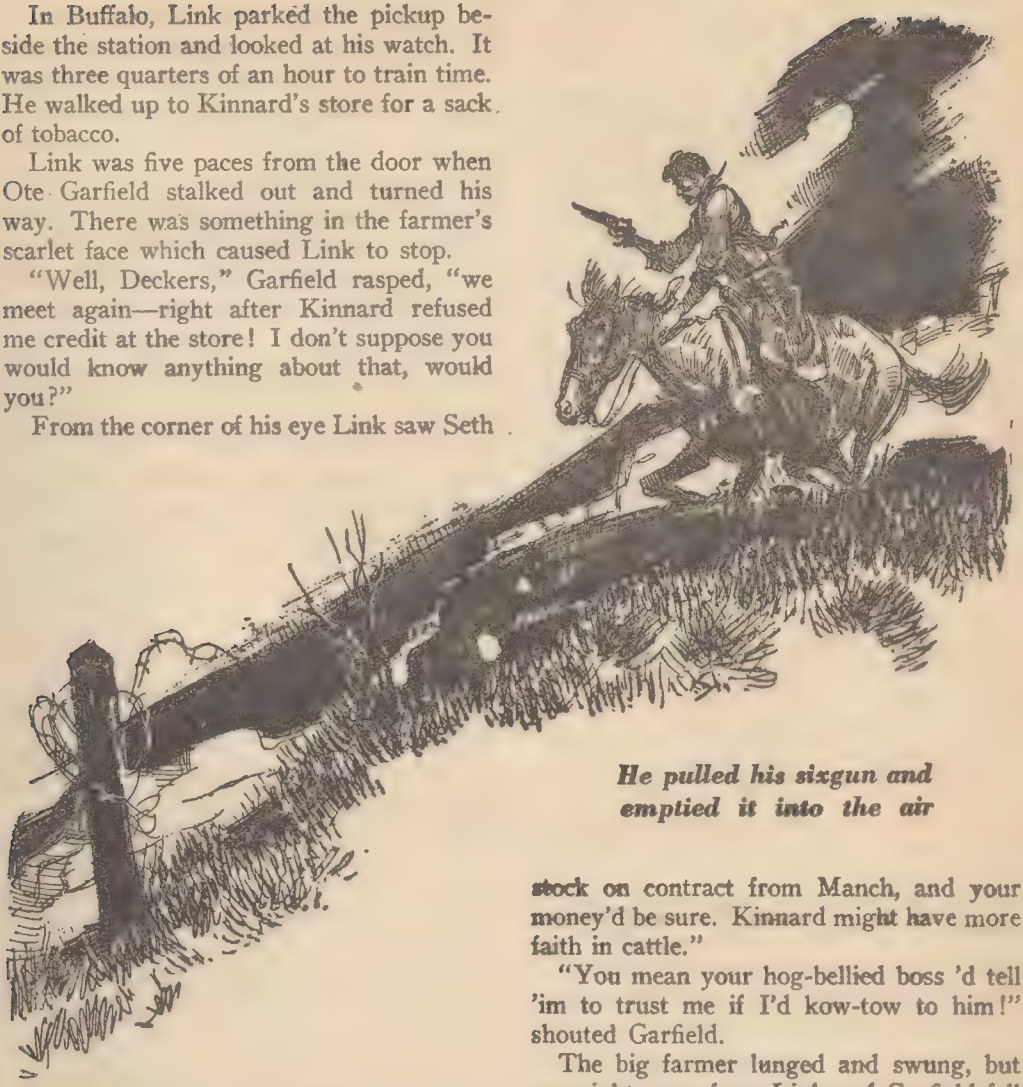
"Well, Deckers," Garfield rasped, "we meet again—right after Kinnard refused me credit at the store! I don't suppose you would know anything about that, would you?"

From the corner of his eye Link saw Seth Bain coming along the walk, and pausing. Link shifted to get his back toward the store wall.

"If Kinnard refused you credit, Garfield," he reasoned, "maybe it means he's got no faith in wheat. Manch told you wheat was a chance proposition in this country."

"Or maybe," bawled Ote Garfield, "it means Kinnard gets so much business from you bigshots he couldn't handle mine! What are you tryin' to feed me?"

"Why don't you run cattle on your lease?" Link asked him. "You could get stock on contract from Manch, and your money'd be sure. Kinnard might have more faith in cattle."



He pulled his sixgun and emptied it into the air

"You mean your hog-bellied boss 'd tell 'im to trust me if I'd kow-tow to him!" shouted Garfield.

The big farmer lunged and swung, but one right-cross from Link and Garfield fell heavily forward, and lay still.

Batting his eyes, Link saw movement, and Garfield's sister Marie knelt beside the fallen man. She looked up at Link rather with awe than with hate.

"I read a book once. It said cowboys fought mostly with guns instead of fists."

Link didn't answer. He heard Seth Bain's voice, remembered the land shark's presence.

"Here's a hundred-dollar bill, Kinnard, for the supplies Garfield wants. When it's used, let me know. The HB-Connected isn't running me or my people out yet."

Link said drily, "But makin' it kinda expensive for you, if you have to back every sodbuster you lease to."

He went back to the depot and bought a round-trip ticket for the county seat. He was back at the bunkhouse by evening.

Manch looked him over at length as he took his place on the old man's right. "I haven't had a puncher wear a tied-down .45 for a long time." He didn't even ask about the land ownership.

Link grinned, a little off-center, and reached papers from his pocket. "Permits to arm every man on the place," he explained. "They didn't argue much at the courthouse when they took a look at my face and I reported a neighbor'd ordered us off his land at gunpoint yesterday."

Manch said grimly, "Ruddy can call it a show if he wants to, but I'm glad we're not takin' it layin' down."

Link looked at Aura, but she refused to notice. After supper he asked her if he could speak with her alone for a minute, and she followed him into the yard.

"I saw Ruddy in town today," he told her. "I thought you would want to know."

"Thank you," she said, a little catch breaking the even coolness of her tone. "I already knew. Ruddy and I are very close to each other."

Link said, "You haven't allowed me a chance yet to clear up some points."

"Haven't I?" she returned. "I understand you beat a man unconscious this morning. This evening you're equipped to kill, if necessary." She gestured toward his gun. "I think you've made yourself perfectly clear. You'll stop at nothing to get what you want."

Link was sore in mind and body. Black anger seared him. Without willing it, he seized her suddenly, jerked her slim body hard against him, pressed his lips fiercely against hers. She was cool, and soft, and incredibly sweet. The anger drained out of him, and he took sudden care with his holding of her. Only then did he become aware of firm arms about his shoulders, of tender yearning in the pressure of her lips.

He released her in awe. She gave a little sob and ran quickly into the house.

LINK stood staring at the door she had closed behind her, his mind groping. At last, giving it up, he turned impatiently away into the night. The drone of a motor filled his ears, and he looked around.

On the rise above the ranch to the southwest a single light moved steadily across the land. As he watched, it turned, and he could see it going away. It turned again and moved back to the right. He understood.

Ote and Marie Garfield must be working in shifts to keep the tractor going around the clock. Tearing the heart out of the land by night as well as by day.

All next day everybody on the place was conscious of the tractor's faint burr as it moved back and forth across the landscape like an evil insect. In daylight you could see the thin pall of dust rising, hovering above the crawling plows. There had been no rain for forty-seven days.

In the afternoon the wind rose, and came searing hot out of the southwest. That was part of August on the prairie, only today it carried the pricking odor of fine dust. Already death was in the wind—death for a land, and a way of life.

Link, watching, saw against the murky horizon a little caravan move across the prairie, the skeletal bars of a combine reel identifying it.

"Bain has moved out his second pawn in the game," he told Manch and Aura. "Let's go size things up."

So they rode through the dust-laden oven blast. A flashy station wagon stood behind the cluster of worn vehicles belonging to the sodbuster. Seth Bain stepped out to meet them.

"I will not have you people intimidating my clients," he bristled. "I call to your attention that you are trespassing."

"You ought to post signs," suggested Link. "Though I'd figure it was the occupant's place to order us off his land if he don't like his neighbors' looks."

A squat, powerful man came forward. Beyond him Link noted two young boys digging a sewage-disposal pit. In front of the house trailer stood a broad-faced, fine-

looking woman with several children clustered about her.

"You are neighbors?" asked the man in a flat Slavic voice.

"They're from that ranch." Bain gestured. "They want to scare you off this land because they don't like farmers."

The man said, "You will not scare off Jan Melchnik. Melchnik will raise wheat. All over the world are hungry people for which Melchnik will raise much wheat. Bread for the hungry."

"That's fine," said Link. "The hungry need beef, too, and this land is good for beef, bad for wheat."

"Deckers wants everybody to do what he says, Melchnik," Bain interpreted.

"Why you say this land bad for wheat?" asked Melchnik.

The boys digging had tossed a two-by-four to the ground. "Look at that board," Link said simply. A filmy spray of dust from Garfield's dry plowing curled across the board. The Melchniks crowded around, fascinated, to watch the dirt stream darken and lighten as the wind gusted, building up, on the lee side, a brown heap of fine silt. For a time nobody had anything to say.

Then Bain cleared his throat. "Any farmer knows a dry spell comes along occasionally. You can have your wheat in when the rain does come. I've seen wheat make sixty bushels to the acre on land like this."

"Why," demanded Link, "did you not stay with that land? I'll tell you. Because that wheat sucked it dry of the moisture of the years. Your kind has to move on to the new land to ruin it."

"Are you working yourself up," Bain cut in, "to use that gun you wear?"

"Why you say this land okay for cattle?" asked Melchnik, his mind evidently slow-moving in the unfamiliar language.

"You can't raise cattle, Melchnik," Seth Bain told him flatly. "The paper we signed says you must raise wheat."

Melchnik swung his heavy head to study Bain. "Why you care what Melchnik raises?"

You could see Bain getting hold of himself with an effort. "Look, Melchnik. I bought the land, so I get one-fourth of the crop. Then if you make more money, I make more money. See? You make about two times as much money on wheat. Understand now?"

"Does he say right?" Melchnik asked Link, after a moment's thought.

"If you get a crop," Link admitted. "But three years out of five, on the average, it's too dry."

"Okay! Melchnik will raise wheat. You go ahead and try to scare!"

"This is no good, Link," Aura spoke up. "Let's go."

AS THEY rode away, the girl burst out bitterly, "That man would think as much of seven cattle as he does of the seven Melchniks! If their crop fails, they lose everything they have. He simply brings in another sucker next year. He has them in his clutches, and he'll not let them go."

"Needs salivatin'," boomed Manch. "And I'll bet Link's faster with a gun."

"Grandad—"

"Listen," said Link. "I don't hear Garfield's tractor."

They rode to where they could see. Garfield's tractor was not in the field.

"You don't suppose," Manch speculated, "he's caught on it's a losin' game and tossed in his cards?"

"I doubt it," said Link, "but it won't hurt to see."

The Garfield tractor was in the yard for repairs, to judge by the overalled legs on the ground beneath it. Ote Garfield emerged to greet them.

"What do you want?"

"Curious," Link told him drily. "We're not used to the quiet."

Unamused, Garfield said, "We'll be runnin' again by—"

"Ruddy!" Aura cried suddenly.

Ruddy Higbow crawled from under the tractor and wiped the grease from his hands, his taut features colored by more than heat and exertion. After him came Marie Garfield, in shirt and jeans.

"I thought you was a Higbow!" Manch exclaimed witheringly.

"That's my name," Ruddy returned.

"But you forget my address. Higbow's Tractor and Implement Sales and Service, Buffalo. Any time you need mechanical work let me know. We don't restrict our trade."

"Don't bother to get your gun, Ote," said Link. "We're leavin' now, anyway."

Link wished bitterly he'd not brought them here. Manch rode slumped and silent in his saddle, and Aura dabbed furtively at her eyes with a handkerchief.

They arrived at the ranch house, and Manch dismounted heavily. "My own flesh and blood—" he began.

Aura asked hopefully, "Shall I try to get him back, Grandad?"

"Sure," Link said, furious. "Ruddy'd get along better with the neighbors than I do, if that's what you want."

"How many sodbusters have you run off?" retorted Aura.

"I'm ready to start any time," Link declared.

"You got a plan?" demanded Manch.

Link nodded. "There's a section of land up there don't belong to Bain. I found that out at the county seat. Some people in Denver own it, and they've kept their taxes up. The county clerk says they'd sell at market price, but Bain is either too hoggish or too short of cash to get hold of any land except at tax sales. First thing to do is buy that section."

"What the hell I want with more land?" demanded Manch.

"I'm tellin' you. Then hire a couple of hands on the quiet to lease another chunk from Bain. For cash, with no clause holdin' 'em to plant wheat."

"I still don't see any sense—"

"Ship in a bunch of range cattle from the Texas Panhandle or some place, and turn 'em out on that land. It's unfenced up there, and you couldn't keep wild young stockers out of green wheat if it was fenced. They'll take care of your wheat farmers in short order."

AURA gasped, "I never heard of anything so cold-blooded! You'd deliberately destroy those people's crops and leave them penniless!"

"I would!" Link shot back at her. "Would you think any different of me if I left 'em alone until they had one crop failure after another and become penniless, turnin' this country into a desert by the process?"

"But it's Bain that's so vicious!" she cried. "The Garfields and Melchniks are only his innocent tools."

"Not so innocent," grunted Link. "I offered both of 'em a chance to make a reasonable amount of honest money. They turned me down to try for the quick and big. Their intention is to wring the land for what they can get out of it, and then leave. They're not even prepared to invest the price of a fence—which is why the plan 'll work."

"I've seen that kind of stuff tried," Manch stated. "You end up gettin' your cattle shot, and have a range war anyway."

"But then they'd be the criminals instead of you," Link argued. "There's no herd law in Colorado yet."

"You'd not even give them a chance!" cried Aura.

"There's plenty o' chance," Manch declared, "from a dozen angles. Here I am with my back to the wall, and Link wants to go throw ten thousand dollars into the Texas Panhandle. I won't do it."

"This is a finish fight," Link warned, "and the one big advantage you've got is your money and your influence. Why not let them do your dirty work?"

"I've never yet depended on anything or anybody else to do my fightin' for me. I don't aim to begin with this fight." Manch stamped off into the house.

Link stood a minute, irresolute, wondering whether to believe the finality of Manch's refusal. Then he noticed Aura, looking as troubled as he himself felt.

"I'm afraid of what he'll do, Link," she quavered.

"What bothers me is what he won't do," answered Link, not able for the moment to forget his disappointment that Manch had refused to do it his way.

"I think he's planning something," Aura said.

Link shrugged. "In the old days they'd

maneuver a nester into a gun fight and shoot him, claimin' self-defense. Or they'd tear up his place while he was away, poison his well, burn him out, anything."

"You don't think Grandad—"

"That's exactly what I do think," retorted Link, "which is why I'm tryin' to think of somethin' better that he'll go for."

"There's nothing better in your scheme to starve them out," she snapped. "At least a prairie fire is quick."

Manch or Ruddy—she couldn't stand criticism of either. He looked at her, standing there with the wind molding the cloth of her shirt gently about the firm, full lines of her bosom, her red-gold curls rippling at the nape of her neck. A mixture of feelings surged inside him. Anger and longing and defeat and grim resolve.

"I am a man," he said harshly, "that stops at nothing to get what he wants—as you have said. I'll admit I'm a man, and that much you can take as a warning to yourself, personally."

He mounted and rode rapidly towards the pasture, gratified that she had blushed at the words and the look that went with them. At least she couldn't ignore him.

The more he thought about it, the more he was convinced his plan was right. All day his mind framed arguments for Manch, and he went to supper still preoccupied.

"Link, you better take the pickup and go to town after supper," Manch stated. "Tell Kinnard I'm askin' him to favor me by not givin' credit to these Melchniks either."

"Okay," Link answered, and went on absently chewing.

"I need to go to town," said Aura, "if I may take the car."

WHEN, that evening, he came out of Kinnard's store, the ranch sedan was parked in front of the hotel. Puzzled, and vaguely uneasy, Link hung around town. He got it from Seth Bain, who was getting cigars in the drug store when Link went there.

"Division of opinion on the HB-Connected?" Bain inquired unpleasantly. "I see the princess is visiting her brother."

Link shot back, "You askin', or hopin'?" But inside he was sick. Aura was working against him behind his back, trying to get Ruddy to return to the ranch.

Bain said, "You might as well have stayed at the ranch. Melchnik is not even asking for credit at the store. I'm disappointed in Manch Higbow. I expected him to think of something with more red pepper in it by now."

Link stared at him. Then he turned and ran for the pickup. More red pepper!

The sedan was gone. Link hurled the pickup across the prairie recklessly, soon seeing in the distance ahead the twin red

Coming up in the next issue

RANGE MISCHIEF

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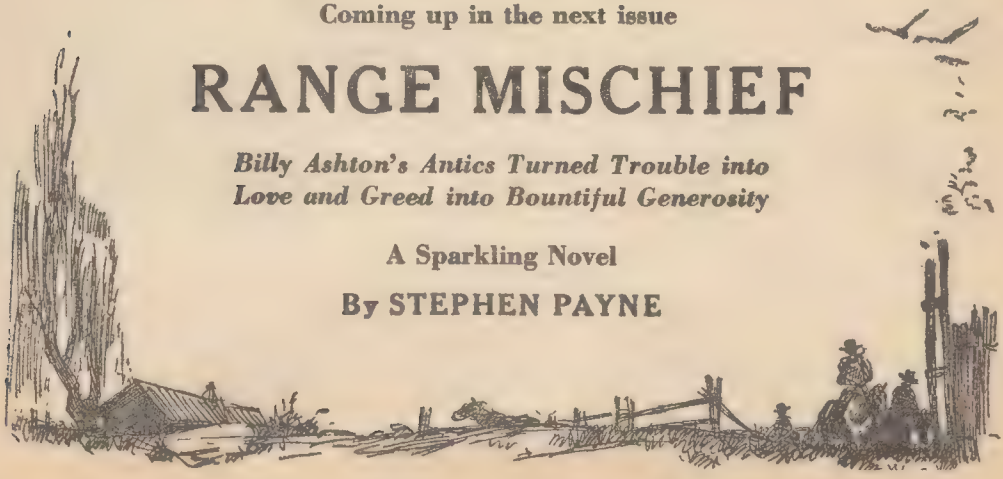


tail-lights of the sedan. He skidded to a stop in the ranch yard behind it.

Everything was dark. Aura was coming down the steps as he jumped out.

"Where is everybody?" she wanted to know.

Even as she spoke a light flared up on the rise to the south. In an instant flames were leaping against the blackness.

"Up there fightin' the sodbusters," Link clipped. "Get inside, quick. Light all the lamps. Make it look like everybody's been here all evenin'. And that's your story if the sheriff comes. Quick! I'll try to get 'em out of it."

He was running, then, for the bunkhouse. He lighted the lamp and grabbed his gun-belt. He buckled it as he ran for the corral, and he was riding at a run as he left the yard.

The fire was between Melchnik's and Garfield's—a decoy to draw the sodbusters while the HB-Connected crew wrecked their camps, if Link guessed correctly the workings of Manch's mind. He headed for Garfield's.

Shots cracked out suddenly. Garfield's was the right choice. Link rolled his spurs and leaned low in the saddle. The shooting rose to a frantic racket, mixed with faint yells.

Link cut wide of the camp, yanking his rifle from the saddle boot. He spaced the eight shots, aiming high, to create a diversion.

He heard more yells, and glimpsed figures scuttling to new positions against the glow of the distant fire. He himself must be only a dim shadow to them. The shooting burst out again, and he caught the wicked snarl of bullets searching for him. He fed another clip of cartridges into the confusion.

Then horses were pounding away from the camp, and Link watched them against the fire's light. He identified the figures of Manch, Jerk, Tex, Slim, and even Juan Pablo, and raced across to join them.

"You guys may be tired of Juan Pablo's grub," he lashed out, "but it's a damn-sight better'n they serve in jail."

"The lousy sons!" Manch panted. "They musta took one look at the fire and then made for camp. On top of us with no warnin' and had us pinned down amongst the machinery. If you hadn't drawed their fire, we'd not 'a' got out."

"They follow, I think," said Juan Pablo.

Link listened a second to the sound of clashing truck motors and then rapped, "Hit for them cottonwoods. Spread out along the draw and start shootin'. Make sure you don't hit anything. All Bain needs to finish us off is some nester killed or hurt."

They spaced themselves along a wide front and cut loose. The trucks stopped, but in half a minute other rifles answered their own. The nesters had formed a skirmish line across the slope and begun an advance on the HB-Connected crew in the draw.

LINK fired automatically, searching his mind for a way to stop this senseless business before there were dead and wounded to account for as well as whatever damage was done at Garfield's.

Then Tex's voice called, "Look at that fire!"

Link looked, and cursed. The fire was moving before the night wind, roaring down the slope onto the HB-Connected. Fence posts were ablaze in half a dozen places. The whole south pasture—maybe the haystacks—

Link jumped recklessly to his saddle and rode down the draw snapping out orders. "Slim, you and Tex make a run for the pumps. If you get the ditches full, we may save the haystacks. The rest of you shoot like hell to keep the sodbusters pinned down."

"Where you goin'?" barked Manch.

"Around back to draw 'em off you again," Link clipped, and rammed home his spurs.

He followed up the draw at top speed. With his noise, bullets came snarling after him again. Then his horse squealed and leaped high, came down buck-jumping. Link clung grimly, not daring to think the animal might be bad hit. In a few seconds it was running again.

He came into Garfield's camp with the light growing stronger. He saw the tractor overturned in the yard where it had been under repair, no doubt by lariats snubbed to saddle horns. He wondered if any lariats had been left as more incriminating evidence, but saw none.

He pulled out his rifle again and rode up to the combine, crashing the stock against the side. The sheet metal set up a deafening racket. Link fought his horse to keep it from bolting.

Listening, he picked up the sound of truck motors once more. The sodbusters, thinking the camp was being wrecked again. Link spurred off towards Melchnik's place.

He made the mile and a quarter in racing time. The camp was dark. That meant, he hoped, that Mrs. Melchnik and the young ones had gone along in the truck. To be sure, he shouted, "Mrs. Melchnik! Mrs. Melchnik!" But no response came from the house trailer. He couldn't lose any more time.

He pulled his sixgun and emptied it into the air. Loaded and emptied it again. Maybe he was too far away. He rode back in the direction of the Garfields'. In the middle of the third round he saw the lights of a truck start out, bobbing, toward him from the Garfields' place. He'd pulled the sodbusters back home. He put his horse in a run for the HB-Connected.

When he hit the draw, he started up the first gas engine he came to. In a few minutes he was in the fire area, and the sputtering racket of engines and the splashing of pumps were sounding above the hissing roar of the fire. Link soaked a big fletch of hay in the irrigation ditch. He started along the fire front dragging the wet hay at the end of his lariat.

He met Tex, wetting down the grass by dipping a bucket in the ditch and throwing it as far as he could. . .

"Keep an eye on my back trail," he advised Tex. "It may be I've set 'em thinkin' about the wisdom of keepin' guard over their camps. But have an eye peeled."

He paused as he saw each of the men to shout instructions and encouragement. He noted with satisfaction that all were there.

At the west edge of the fire he came upon Aura, methodically lighting backfires, slapping them out with a wet sack, pinching the conflagration in.

"Did they do the sodbusters much damage?" she asked tersely.

"Didn't have time." He watched for a few seconds the play of light in her hair, thinking of her quick understanding and cool courage.

"I'll see Grandad doesn't forget what you've done for him tonight," she said then.

Link rode back along the fire line. Maybe she'd recommend him for a bonus! She'd sure not let herself think he cared about anything else, like for instance a kind word from her. He judged that for some reason Ruddy wasn't coming back to the ranch.

IN THE thin murk of false dawn they straggled into the ranch house. Juan Pablo put breakfast on the table. The sodbusters had not come again. The fire was out, and the hay stacked for winter had been saved. Along the south side of the creek for more than a mile the pasture was a blackened ruin. There was a lot of fence to replace. The wind strengthened with the light, and the smell of dust mixed with the smoke smell.

They didn't talk, until Link asked, "How much damage did you tough guys do up there? We better know before the sheriff comes."

"We only pulled Garfield's tractor over." Jerk Nepesta was as defiant as a small boy in a neighbor's apple tree. Link was too weary to laugh.

"You ought to get off with thirty days apiece, then," he predicted.

"Grandad," Aura said, "I've been afraid all along you'd do something desperate and get yourself in trouble."

"Don't tell me 'I told you so,' " shouted Manch. "Nobody's in trouble yet. We got away. And if we lost some pasture, at least it never cost ten thousand dollars to try the idea."

"It might have worked," Link said slowly, "in the days when cattle was king in this country. But now there's sheepmen here, and poultry men, and scientific small-

area dry farmers, and business people. The law won't wink at anybody any more."

"You've been working up to this ever since Link got those permits to carry arms," Aura persisted. "I should have known."

So, Link saw suddenly, should he have. "Anyway," he said, "we none of us better know anything when the sheriff comes."

But the sheriff did not come. They kept a taut but exhausted vigil, taking snatches of rest by turns—all but Manch, who shut himself in his room.

Right after noon Link saw Seth Bain's flashy station wagon travel slowly along the HB-Connected line fence on Garfield's side. He was sizing up the damage, Link supposed bitterly. Once the station wagon stopped, and Bain got out and stood looking over the ranch with a pair of field glasses. Link cursed.

But when Jerk Nepesta ripped out an oath, stepped into the bunkhouse and returned with his rifle, Link snapped, "Forget it, Jerk! We've got too much to explain as it is."

The following morning Link sent Tex and Jerk to irrigate the alfalfa. He hoped for a short fourth cutting, and they'd need all the hay they could get this winter, with a third of their pasture burned. Link and Slim set out to start the heavy task of rebuilding the fence. Manch and Aura went to re-shuffle the cattle among the undamaged pastures.

They had been at work barely an hour when Slim said suddenly, "Somethin's wrong!"

Link looked up to see Tex and Jerk riding along the draw at a run. He and Slim jumped to saddle and spurred to meet them.

"Sand in the pumps!" Jerk panted as they met.

"What do you mean?"

"Somebody shovelled every engine and pump in the whole draw plumb full o' sand," Tex explained. "Practically covered some of 'em. Have to be completely overhauled."

"Them lousy sodbusters!" cried Slim. "Shall I go for the sheriff, Link?"

Link shook his head. "We started this visitin' back and forth, remember? Bain figured out this answer yesterday. Jerk, you got your sixgun and rifle?"

The old-timer nodded eagerly.

"O. K.," said Link. "I want this line patrolled. If you have time, you can fix some fence, but mainly you're a guard. Tex will be out to relieve you at four. Slim will take over at midnight. Keep that goin' until further orders. You two are off duty now."

He struck home his spurs, knowing that their curious eyes followed him.

HE FOUND Manch and Aura on the northwest eighty. He told them briefly what had happened. "I lined up the boys to patrol the line round the clock," he finished. "And now you can make out my time, Manch."

Manch sputtered, "I wouldn't have reckoned you'd be one to quit when the goin' got tough."

"You still don't reckon that," Link returned roughly. "Let's just say you don't care to back my play any longer, and I sure won't back yours in this kinda game. Next time the sodbusters will go for more than the pumps. The hay, maybe, or the cattle—and I won't be responsible."

"I'm not holdin' you responsible for this," growled Manch.

"Then what are you holdin' me for?" Link demanded. "If I understood your ruckus with Ruddy, you wanted a foreman to do somethin' to save the ranch from bein' dusted out. But you go ahead with the doin'—which is your privilege. Only if all you want is a right bower while you name the trumps every hand, why not get Ruddy back, and make Aura happy at the same time?"

"Ruddy won't—" Aura broke off, flushing.

"Right bowers are gettin' scarce," Link grunted.

"Suppose I took your plan to get a bunch of range cattle and turn 'em loose on the sodbusters," Manch said slowly. "Would you stay on then?"

"Sure I would." Link tried not to sound too exultant.

"What if the sodbusters don't take that layin' down?" went on Manch. "What if

they come back shootin', same as if we jumped 'em again. You gonna stick then?"

"Till hell freezes over!" Link vowed. "We'll be on the right side of the law."

"If the ranch is wiped out," observed Manch, "it won't matter much which side of the law we're on. And a dead man don't care about that either, I expect."

"That's right," Link agreed soberly. "But the only other thing I can see is to wait for the dust. I'd rather take a chance."

"This is a chance, and the dust is sure," growled Manch. "I don't see as I've got much choice. Ten thousand do it?"

"Maybe less," said Link. "I'll catch the morning train and go after the men and the cattle, if you say so. Be gone two or three weeks. I'll keep strict accounts. It's still askin' you to trust me with a lot."

Manch said, "I'll write the check while Aura gets the car."

Smoke of the approaching train was smudging the horizon when Aura pulled the car up beside the depot. His hand on the door handle, Link turned back to her.

"I'd sure like to kiss you good-by," he said, his voice tight.

She looked straight ahead over the steering wheel and said in stifled tones, "Grandad gave you a check. . . ."

He strode into the depot without looking back. When he came out, ticket in hand, the train was clanging and the car was gone. Why, Link wondered bitterly, had he even bothered to look? Every time he gained with Manch, he lost with Aura. If he couldn't remember that, and forget this dull ache at the junction of his ribs, he'd better have quit the HB-Connected.

IT WAS the first Saturday in October when Link dropped from the afternoon train to the platform of the depot at Buffalo. The cramp of many chair-car miles was in his bones. He walked up to Kinnard's and made sure nobody from the HB-Connected had been in today. Then he sat down on the store porch to wait, knowing somebody would come for supplies before Saturday was over.

The heat had gone from the prairie, and the wind was from the northwest. It picked up whirls of trash along the street and between buildings. Presently Manch stopped the pickup in front of the store.

"Figured you'd absconded," the Old Man said as Link went to the pickup and shook hands.

Link grinned wryly. "Didn't Aura tell you I'd be back to do you out of the rest of the ranch?"

They bought supplies and started home. Link took a small account book from his pocket. "Where I've been and what I've done," he explained.

Manch, who had turned the driving over to Link, studied the pages carefully. "I coulda bought that land ten years ago for about ten percent of that," he commented.

"The fix the country was in then," said Link, "you'd have been payin' high. Here's the deed."

"I took it for granted this Bill Smith was another of Bain's sodbusters. Couldn't figure why he was drillin' a well."

"He's on land you own," Link explained. "We'll water the cattle at that well."

"I heard this Chad Johnson did lease from Bain," said Manch.

"I instructed him to lease from Bain, for cash," Link answered. "He was to get an open lease not requirin' him to plant wheat. He's supposed to help Smith build a shack for 'em to live in."

"So we got seven quarters of land right in the middle of the sodbusters," nodded Manch. "When the cattle comin'?"

"A week or so. They're a wild bunch o' stuff."

"You mean you got a thousand head for this figure?"

Link shook his head. "That's only a down payment. I got 'em on a grazing-in-transit contract, so we don't have to finish payin' for 'em till we market 'em, four months from now. I figured in four months they'd eat all the grass off that seven quarters."

"They'll eat more than that. And when they start in on Garfield's wheat," Manch predicted, "hell won't have us."

"Maybe he'll know when he's licked and get out."

"Maybe," grunted Manch. "I hear he

didn't know when he was licked the last time you and him tangled."

"We may have some trouble," Link admitted, "but I'm hopin' it won't last long. After he finds out we've got the advantage of the law with us."

"He's gonna be pretty stubborn about that wheat," opined Manch. "Got a good stand, and fairly green."

"Then you've had rain?"

"No. This makes eighty-eight days. We've had some small dust storms. But you know how wheat'll do on sod. Wind sucks up subsoil moisture. That's got the rest of 'em plowin' like crazy to get their seed in. Must be fifteen or twenty new ones since you left. Melchnik's got his seed in, and him and Garfield are helpin' the others."

"Bain's really been workin'," Link judged. "If this drought holds, though, they may get dusted out."

"Yes," agreed Manch. "But there's so damn many if's."

IN SPITE of his reasoned self-warnings, Link found his heart jumping at sight of Aura. She was in the corral, unsaddling her horse.

"Aura, how have you been?" His tone could have left no doubt in her mind as to his meaning.

She considered for a moment. "I think we've managed pretty well," she said then. "The crew kept up the patrol, and got the fence fixed too. Grandad and I have been working the cattle, and got them ready for wintering."

Link said doggedly, "I don't mean the ranch. I mean you."

"Oh." She looked at him. Probably he'd never understand those looks she gave him. "I guess I'm ready for wintering too."

He turned abruptly toward the bunkhouse.

The pumps had not been re-conditioned, and Link was glad. Taking the engines apart, cleaning them piece by piece, pulling the pumps and cleaning air valves, pistons, and bearings made work—always tedious, and often heavy, but it filled the daytime and brought sleep at night.

Finally a morning came when he could say, "We've got some trail-herdin' to do today. I'll need all hands in the saddle, and two extra horses. In town as soon as we can make it. Juan Pablo, can you find us with the pickup at noon? We'll need grub and hot coffee."

"*Sí*," said Juan Pablo. "I think."

At the stockyards in Buffalo they found two cowhands on the top rail, waiting.

"Hi," Link greeted the men. "We

brought horses for you. Manch, meet Bill Smith and Chad Johnson. They work for you."

Manch grunted, "So I hear." He shook their hands. "I hope you fellas know what you're in for. Soon as the cattle comin' in along with that smoke yonder get on your land, you can figure there'll be hell to pay."

Smith, a tall, lean cowpoke with a slow smile, drawled, "I cain't find it in me to get all a-tremble."

"We been honin' our teeth regular, Mr. Higbow," the shorter, blocky Chad Johnson added.

The train pulled in, twenty-five cars. The whole crew went at the task of getting cattle down the chute. Link posted Aura on the cat-walk at the top of the chute with a tally book.

"A thousand and seven," she said finally.

"Seven more than contract," Link observed. "You ought to make some profit, Manch, when they put on a little weight."

"I'll feel lucky if they pay the freight," Manch growled.

It was a strenuous, dusty drive. Link sent Aura to ride point, making it as light on her as possible. But the Texas cattle were spooky, and lightning fast. Riders

and horses were sweating and weary by late in the afternoon, when they got the herd watered at Smith's new well.

They bunched them then, with difficulty, to graze until dark. Three of the hands started riding herd, while the others headed for the ranch house to get food and rest before taking the night guard. Half a mile away, Garfield's new wheat spread like an emerald carpet across the level prairie.

Seth Bain's station wagon came jouncing across the lumpy sod. It was full of men—Bain, and the county sheriff, and Ote Garfield; Melchnik and three others who were newcomers while Link had been away.

LINK asked harshly, "What do you want, Bain?"

"I want to know what this means." The land shark's hair was rumpled, and desperation showed in his small eyes.

"It means you're finished!" rapped Link. "We've got seven quarters in here, and we're runnin' cattle on 'em. You shouldn't have left a hole in your middle when you started to surround the HB-Connected."

"See here," the sheriff put in, "I'll run in the first man that starts trouble!"

"Then protect our wheat," shrilled Bain. "Or let us protect it."

"You can run cattle off your land any time," the officer told him. "But you're liable if you kill or injure any of 'em. That's the law in this state."

"A hell of a law!" Bain yelled. "In other words, the little man be damned!"

Link said sternly, "A lot of little men went broke raisin' wheat here in the thirties. Couldn't even pay taxes on their land. Then a vulture like you comes along and grabs up that land at tax sales, fifty thousand acres of it. Why're you yappin' about the little man?"

"You better figure out a way to settle this peaceble," the sheriff insisted.

"I suggested runnin' cattle on the land," said Link. "There's good money in grazin' fees."

"This is conspiracy!" stormed Bain. "A conspiracy to drive every wheat farmer out of this whole region! I'll tell you now you won't get away with it!"

The tires of the station wagon threw dirt as he started off.

"Whatever happens," said Aura, "the sodbusters are ruined. When you go after something, you take no chances of losing."

"I think it may work, Link," offered Manch. "Win, lose, or draw, you can ramrod the HB-Connected as long as you want."

"Thanks," said Link soberly. "I'm pullin' out behind the sodbusters."

"What's the sense in that?" exclaimed Manch. But Aura rode looking steadily at her horse's ears.

"There's cattle ranches all up and down this country," Link said slowly, "from Saskatchewan to Sonora. Somewhere in that stretch there ought to be one that could use a man without displacin' anybody."

But there was not, he knew, in that stretch or any other stretch, a ranch where he'd find a girl so beautiful, so unreasonable, and so utterly desirable.

At eight o'clock Link, with Tex and Slim, relieved Jerk and Chad and Bill on the night-herding. For a day or two Link intended to hold the Texas cattle as close as possible. Give the sodbusters a chance to get out if they would without provoking trouble.

The night wind was stiff out of the south, and heavy with the smell of dust and dry grass—parched air, with a stifled threat of dirt storm for those that knew the signs as Link did. The cattle were tired from the train trip, and bedded down anyway. But, riding ceaseless circle around them, Link and Tex and Slim raised their voices in an old, plaintive, quieting tune from another day in the cattle industry.

Jerk and Chad and Bill took over again at two o'clock.

The rest were at the ranch house taking a quick breakfast when they heard the pound of a hard-ridden horse. Jerk Nepesta slid his mount to a stop before the porch.

"She's comin' on to blow from the north, and we can't hold the critters much longer," Jerk reported. "Dusty as hell, but they smell that green wheat."

"Well, that's what we expected," said Link grimly.

"The sodbusters are patrollin' the wheat," Jerk returned. "With rifles. All the men, and some women and kids."

Link rapped, "The fools! Don't they know stampeding cattle! So they want a show-down! Well, we've got the law with us. We need the sheriff here."

"I'll go for him," Aura offered promptly.

Link stepped outside. Far off, on a ploughed field, dust lifted in a rolling billow and went scudding levelly before the wind.

"I don't like the looks of this," Link said, "but I guess you'll be all right in the car. Will you tell Bill and Chad we're on our way? I want 'em to get the stock millin', if they can, so nothin'll happen till the sheriff gets there. It's up to us to try to avoid a stampede—and protect the sodbusters' families if there is one."

Aura said, "I'll have the sheriff back here in three hours if the car will stand the pace." She ran for the shed.

"Tex and Slim, get horses," Link ordered. "Manch, will you get guns for everybody? I'll rustle gunny sacks to flap."

They all moved on the run, including Manch. Link found the gunny sacks and dumped them on the porch, hurried into the house to break out reserve ammunition. The hallway went dark before him, and he stumbled against a clothes tree.

"Leave that door open!" he bawled over his shoulder, and whirled around as silence answered him. The hallway was still black, blacker than any door—

Link groped his way back. The door was standing wide open. He stepped through, and understanding hit him.

Dust!

It was ninety-six days since they'd had a drop of rain. Up on the bench-lands long chains of acres were expertly powdered with man's best machinery. Now nature had taken over. Link had known it was coming, only he'd not expected it so soon.

After the first front had passed, they got a little light. Enough to see some—not to the barn or the bunkhouse, but so you could walk without stumbling. The men came groping to him.

"Better hole in," yelled Slim.

"Don't dare," Link shouted. "Soak your neckerchief in water and tie it over your face," Link ordered. "Grab a gunny-sack and soak it at the tank and tie it over your horse's muzzle. Then get ridin'!"

They rode hunched in their saddles, collars high and hats low as in a blizzard. The wet scarf filtered the air a little, and protected a man's face from the cutting blast. There wasn't anything you could do for the eyes. Tex started with a pair of goggles, but in half a mile tore them off and threw them away. The gritty particles scratched the glass beyond use.

Curiously, the wind did not seem especially high; but the gusts moved with a peculiar effect, as if they eddied vertically, lashing up and down against the parched earth.

They rode close together, for an endless time. Then they heard a muffled crack. More sounded, in rapid succession.

"Guns!" Link barked. "Step it up."

He spurred to a nervous jog, trying to watch the ground for prairie-dog holes.

Suddenly he was among cattle. They were drifting, heads down, before the storm, moving slowly, with an occasional anxious bawl that was like a moan. They didn't seem to see, didn't turn aside for the horses.

The thing was revealed suddenly. Link made out a ghostly company of sodbusters—Bain's henchmen, Link saw dimly—evidently the families had already run off. They stalked the flanks of the herd, shooting into the sluggish mass of cattle as fast as they could load. Steers dropped along the edge, one and two and three at a time.

Link heard outraged yells from his men, the bellow of revolvers as they let drive at the butchers. The sodbusters, aware of them for the first time, turned their guns on them, and the opposing forces of men and cattle milled in the brown, bullet-laden wind. Link drove home his spurs and burst through the herd in a charge. But already indecision had come on the sodbusters, and the gunfire was lessening. The HB men fired into the air now, as Bain's men began to run from the scene.

Suddenly the shadowy riflemen disappeared, seeming to dissolve into the storm. When Link looked around, he was alone. He could hear voices calling beyond the brown shifting curtains, but whose they were he could not tell.

Abruptly he was face to face with Seth Bain. The bland promoter was hatless. Hair and face and tailored suit were all one with the color of dust—save for his eyes, red-rimmed and savage.

With a little snarling cry Bain brought his rifle up and fired as Link snapped a hasty shot at him. Link felt something slap his shoulder, and then he was falling.

He came to his feet, instantly, he thought. Bain was two feet away, yanking his rifle belt. The range was point-blank.

By reflex, Link lunged and grabbed the barrel, feeling the heat sear through his riding gloves. The force of his jerk threw Bain against him, and they both went down, losing the rifle.

Bain was on top, clutching for Link's throat. Link felt a hand close his windpipe. Felt knees in his belly. Bain's weight was a terrifying, maddening burden. Link clawed and struck and bit in frantic, animal fear.

His own weakness shocked Link, until pain leapt in his shoulder, and he remembered he'd been shot. But the pain did clear his head.

He rolled fiercely, flinging Bain from him. They came to their feet, the heavier Bain more slowly. Link balanced himself and drove his good right fist with all his power at Bain's jaw. It landed high, but Bain went rolling.

Then Bain scrabbled up and ran headlong for the cover of the blinding storm. Link started to follow, then stumbled over the rifle. He snatched it up and fired one quick shot. Bain lurched, staggered forward, and was hidden by the sweep of blown dirt.

Link looked for his horse; it had run off, ignoring the trailing reins in its terror. Link wove groggily in the direction he thought it would go.

After a while he could breathe again, and his head cleared some. He wadded his scarf against his shoulder to keep dust out of the wound.

Then he thought of Aura, overtaken by the storm, perhaps before she'd reached the herd, certainly before she'd gone much farther. She couldn't see to drive, and might have left the car and even now be lost, as he was, in this blinding hell.

Link peered around, trying to see, trying to hear. There was nothing but the shifting, weaving, brown-black wall of dust; no sound but the steady, shrill hiss of the lashing grit.

Link shouted. "Aura!" His call echoed hollowly. He moved along, calling every few feet.

The color of his world changed slowly to dull orange. He studied it a long time before he realized it was sunset. Sunset, and the wind going slowly down. But objects seemed to creep into view.

THEN he heard his name.

"Link!" It was a hoarse croak. He turned, saw a tattered figure stumbling toward him. A figure with streaming hair, and rags that had been a dress. The most beautiful girl in the world. And then he was running.

She was in his arms, her soft, slim body clinging, her breath swift in little sobbing sounds, her lips infinitely sweet.

Presently she looked at him and laughed unsteadily. "Your face needs washing. Oh," she gave a small cry, "you're hurt!"

"Why," he murmured, comforting, "it don't need mentioning. But I like you fussin' over it."

"I expect," she said faintly, not looking at him, "I'm as devoted a fusser as you'd find from Saskatchewan to Sonora."

"I wouldn't even care to look," Link declared, and drew her close again. . . .

They located Bill Smith's new windmill against the darkening sky, and walked towards it. They found the crew hazing in to the water tank there what cattle they could find.

"Not gonna be any thousand, not by a long sight," Manch declared soberly. "Even when we find 'em all."

"Anybody get close enough to identify

the sodbusters at the shootin'?" Link asked. "I caught up with Bain long enough to swap lead, and then lost him. But I may have left him some little mark, like he left me."

"Then let's find Bain!" barked Manch. "It was his idea, and he bossed it, you can bet."

They got the car, and after Link had removed and cleaned the carburetor, it started. "Bain's likely holed up with one of the sodbusters," Manch guessed.

They saw a lantern bobbing in Melchnik's field and drove that way, all three silent. They found Melchnik on his knees, his great hands pawing at the bare hardpan from which all topsoil had blown. Link opened the window and leaned out.

"Melchnik, when have you seen Bain?"

"Only this morning!" Melchnik whimpered. "Only this morning was wheat sprouts in this ground! I find green sprouts only this morning! Where the wheat now?"

"The wheat was only a bad dream," Link told him sternly. "What you must do is take your combine and go where the gramma grass is thickest. Get seed. Put grass seed in your drill and go over the land again. You are a good farmer, Melchnik, and you got fine boys to help you."

"Melchnik's boys are fine boys," the man nodded.

Then they were riding across what had been Garfield's wheat.

"Took the young wheat out by the roots," Manch observed. "Ground was loose between the drills, from workin', and the wind had been dryin' it for a long time."

"It's Bain we know was shootin' cattle," Link said bleakly. "I'm glad of that!"

They stopped in front of the Garfields' house trailer, and Ote came down the steps.

"Are you after me?" he asked evenly.

Link looked at him. Ote had cleaned up and changed his clothes since the storm. He stood now, not defiant and not afraid, not acknowledging the loss of all he had in the world since morning.

"We're lookin' for Seth Bain," Link told him.

Maw Garfield came out then, and after her Marie. Link had not seen the girl in a dress before. It softened her appearance, and Link realized that she was very young.

Ruddy Higbow followed Marie down the steps, as the three got out of the car.

Ruddy moved to shake Link's hand. "The old HB-Connected ought to go places now," Ruddy said.

"Are you interested," asked Link, "in comin' back to it?"

Ruddy shook his head. "I belong in the machinery business. I'd like to have Ote come in with me, if—Marie and I—"

"Manch," said Link, "I've saved up some money to invest in a ranch somewhere, some time. Now I feel free to ask if you'll let me invest in the HB-Connected."

Manch chuckled. "Gonna be a partner to Aura two ways, eh? Well, that's good." He turned to Marie. "Young lady, will you bring my grandson to see me before you're married? Looks like I'll have some cash to advance on his inheritance."

"I was thinking," Link said, "as a one-thirtieth owner of the HB, I'd recommend the purchase of some tractors and seed drills. So as we back Melchnik in a program of puttin' this blowed-out land back to gramma grass, we'd not lack for equipment. We could buy from the Higbow and Garfield firm, couldn't we?"

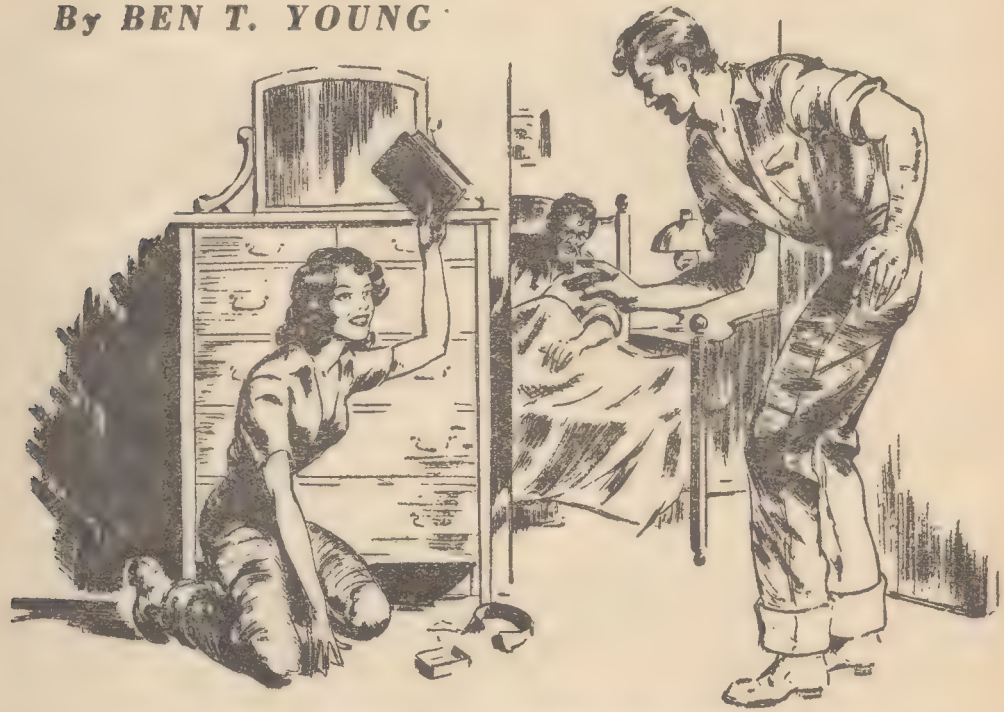
The next morning Manch and Link set out on horseback to make a tally of the dead Texas cattle. It would be a serious loss, but one the HB-Connected could take. They rode from one dust-covered heap to another, Link making records in the book. Rode, and marked, and came at last upon one carcase not that of a Texas critter.

Link's hasty shot had broken Seth Bain's leg, they found. The man had fallen, and couldn't rise. Link remembered back to a day that seemed long ago, when they had watched the fine dust sift over a two-by-four in Melchnik's yard.

That was the way the dust had drifted over Seth Bain's body. Building up with the reeking wind until it covered Bain's face, and smothered him.

Cached at Chuckawalla

By ***BEN T. YOUNG***



Promptly the torn, dusty volume was rescued

SHORTLY after Tom Conlon had left Blythe and turned south, a blow had started. The brassy sun (and everything else beyond twenty feet from the struggling station-wagon) was soon all but obscured by the flying sand. When it seemed about to choke the carburetor as well as himself, Tom decided to stop.

Having edged off the road he saw—during a momentary lull in the wind—that he'd fortunately halted near one of the few habitations in that sparsely-settled desert region of California. A large covered truck stood before a squat flat-roofed building which, a sign indicated, housed the Chuckawalla Store. Thirsty, he quit the station wagon and hot-footed for the entrance.

With the door closed behind him he saw two people. The girl behind the counter was regarding him with what could have been relief, but the man (apparently the truck driver) on the near side of the counter was obviously annoyed. "Hi," Tom grinned.

Unexpected as a fifth ace, the girl turned on a thousand watt smile. "Well what do you know?" she cried. "Uncle Barney will

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TOM tangled with ju jitsu, jewels, and a genuine gem of a gal

sure be glad to see you. He's in bed, but go right on back—Here, c'mon along!"

Being quick under the hat Tom kept his trap shut and followed her into living quarters. As she stopped to close the door behind them she gave him a meaningful look, and led on through into a gloomy storeroom, the door of which she also closed.

"Excuse me for collaring you this way," she said then, her low voice rough with tension. "But that Pete Sligo is crowding me a little. Knowing Uncle Barney is still weak from the flu, and thinking no one would come along during this blow, he—Could you possibly stay here tonight?"

Leaning against a post with his arms folded, Tom regarded her. He didn't know what he might be getting into, but—"Okay," he said. "My car's fixed up to sleep in."

"Swell!" She grasped the door latch. "Come meet Uncle Barney."

Propped up in his bed, old Barney Farwell was smoking, and after Tom was introduced and his presence explained, Janis went back into the store.

"I don't see so good any more," Barney said, squinting at Tom. "But you must look reliable else she wouldn't have latched onto you that way. Sligo has sure got troublesome since she come."

"Doesn't she live here?"

"Shucks, no." Barney wagged his head. "She's my brother's daughter from over to Nogales. Where you from?"

"New Mexico." Tom was firing his pipe. "For a while I was in school at Socorro—"

"I come from Arizona," Barney cut in, and like a naturally garrulous man who has been alone too much, he talked and coughed and talked. He told of copper mining in Bisbee, of drifting westward, and dry-washing a little gold from the old dumps beside the abandoned Picacho mine down near Yuma.

Later, having been lucky at poker, he'd bought the Chuckawalla store and well, and the old nearby mine that went with them. "There's pay dirt in there," he insisted. "But what with one thing and another I ain't never got none out. Likely I never will now, either. I keep a-gettin' these chest colds; and this time, if Janis hadn't come high-tailin' out, I couldn't have even kept the dam' store open."

Just then Janis came back. "The wind's gone down, and Sligo finally hauled out for El Centro." She sighed with a relieved smile. "You stay, though, Mr. Condon. Pete may finish that quart he has with him and come back. Now keep quiet and rest, Uncle Barney, while I get supper."

WHEN it came to gals, Tom was no eager beaver; but he did have to admit, when the lamp was lit, that this Janis Farwell was a nice dish, even in faded levis and cotton shirt. Her eyes were like aquamarines; her hair was the glistening yellow of topaz crystals.

After they'd cleaned the sand from dishes and utensils, and got a mesquite fire going in the rickety cookstove, he straddled a chair, rested his arms on the back, and let her chatter. Sligo, she told him, was a nuisance with the disposition of a sidewinder, but they had to tolerate him, for there was no other independent trucker willing to haul their meager needs up from El Centro.

"Can he make a living that way?" Tom asked.

With a shrug Janis moved the steaming coffee pot aside. "I don't see how, even though he hauls clear on up to Blythe; but he always seems to have money."

"This store do much business?"

She shook her head. "Practically none, since the old-time desert rats quit prospecting around. A few short-cutting tourists like yourself come this way and stop for a quart of oil or a water-bag or tobacco, and once in a while some rock hounds—"

"Rock hounds?" Tom was puzzled.

"Yep. Amateur geologists whose hobby is collecting crystals, the sort of stuff used in costume jewelry. Uncle Barney just plain got stuck with this layout, and neither Dad nor I know what to do about it.

"He's getting old and rickety and shouldn't stay here alone, and while I love the desert I can't bury myself here indefinitely. Dad spent a lot of money on my schooling at Tucson, and I should be earn-

ing a living. Now if you'll open this can of peaches while I take in Uncle Barney's eggs and toast, we'll be ready."

TOM WAS more of a listener than a talker, but as they ate he found her extracting information without seeming to be inquisitive.

He explained that he was no idling tourist but—having achieved some slight success as a writer of Western and adventure stories—was looking for a quiet place where he could live cheaply and work at a job until the writing was on a paying basis. When he mentioned having partially completed a course in mining engineering, she grabbed his arm.

"Maybe you'd look at Uncle Barney's mine and tell him it's no good. If he could be really convinced of that—"

"But my opinion wouldn't be worth a whoop," he protested. "Whatever I told him could well be wrong, and I won't assume the responsibility."

She was obviously disappointed but said no more. Later, though—as he lay in his bedroll on the floor of the station wagon, which he'd moved to the rear of the store—he thought about it. These Farwells were plainly between a rock and a hard place, and maybe he'd been too curt in his refusal to have a look at that mine.

Hell, I'll take a look anyhow, he decided, and fell to trying to remember what he'd learned of geology and minerology. But mixed with his recollections of andesite and rhyolite and psilomelane, were thoughts of Pete Sligo.

He'd thrown Sligo only a passing glance; but he remembered the trucker as a black-jowled hombre who failed utterly to inspire a feeling of unreserved trust. Certainly he was no fit suitor for a nice kid like Janis.

When he told her, next morning, of his decision to look at the old working, she was delighted, and Uncle Barney's hopes were high as taxes. "Boy," he exulted, sitting up in bed. "I'm sure obliged, and I'm givin' you half interest in that mine right now. There's wealth a-plenty there fer all of us."

The two young people exchanged glances, and Tom shook his head. "Thanks a lot, old-timer," he said gruffly. "But whatever's there is all yours."

Shortly, with Janis' help, he found an old shovel, a geologist's pick, candles, and a bottle of mercury. "I'll leave the quicksilver because I probably won't need it," he said. "Now, where is this glory hole?"

The faint rocky trail which Janis pointed out angled up the slope across the road, and ended at a black hole near a smoke tree. Before starting to climb he scanned the incline from base to ridge, and saw several long pegmatite dikes roughly parallel with the jagged crest.

HAVING reached the hole he proceeded with caution. Being February, the snakes, scorpions, centipedes and tarantulas were supposed to be elsewhere, but he was taking no chances. Nor did he want the dry-rotted timbers supporting the entrance to the tunnel to fold and leave him trapped.

With a lighted candle in one hand and the small pick in the other he started to crawl, peering ahead into the gloom which the sputtering yellow flame barely cut, cringing as his hands came in contact with the grisly remnants of some coyote's feast.

Soon he'd reached the end of the short tunnel and thankfully turned back. Having that spot of daylight ahead helped a lot, and he began to carefully examine the sides and floor of the gallery for signs of yellow-flecked quartz.

Halfway back he found some, and chipped it out with the pick. There seemed to be no more there, but just opposite he found a somewhat greater quantity.

Finally, with a hatful of samples, he crawled out into the sunlight and, caching the tools under the smoke tree, started for the store. Entering quietly, he motioned for Janis to meet him around back; and there, screened from Barney's window by the station wagon, he held out the hatful of quartz. "Maybe I've found something," he said, and smiled a bit ruefully. "Thought I'd better try and decide if it's gold, though, before seeing your uncle. Mind bringing out a frying pan and that mercury?"

From his car he got a hand-axe, and when she'd returned he selected the most likely ore samples, pounded and ground them to coarse powder in the frying pan, and poured in some mercury.

"If those yellow specks and the mercury amalgamate, we've got gold," he explained, beginning to stir with a stick.

But they didn't. The yellow specks were obviously only iron pyrites, fool's gold. "Well, I'm both glad and sorry," Tom sighed, dumping out the mess. "I'd really like to have told the old boy—"

"Me too," Janis broke in, with tears in her voice. "He sets such store by that darned hole in the ground, and he'd be the happiest man alive if—D'you suppose there's the least use in looking some more?"

"I doubt it, but I'll poke around again this afternoon—"

"Oh-oh! Car out front," she said, and hurried away.

A COLD wind was sucking up the valley and Tom put on a jacket, then cat-footed into the kitchen. Just as he closed the door he heard a strangled cry, a cry that stiffened his red hair. Two jumps took him into the store.

With one arm the stubble-faced Sligo had pinioned both of Janis' struggling arms to her sides. With the other hand he was forcing her chin up. Leaping forward Tom grasped the trucker's collar and yanked.

But, being a powerful ape, Sligo was scarcely moved. Startled, though, he freed Janis and whirled. "So you're still around, eh?" he growled, squaring off.

With quick eyes Tom was sizing him up, carefully removing his jacket, and edging toward the counter as if to lay it down.

This seemingly casual move put Sligo a little off guard, and when Tom was close enough he flung the jacket over Sligo's head and belted him in the belly. As Sligo sagged, Tom wrapped him up with an elegant uppercut and dragged the groggy hulk outside.

Panting, he straightened and glanced at the truck, apparently filled to the roof with crates of garden produce. But near the truck's floor two swarthy faces were peering anxiously out under a slightly-lifted curtain. Quickly the canvas was dropped, and Tom went back inside.

"Well!" Janis' eyes were twinkling. "You sure defrosted the cold war. Thanks. But that Sligo won't rest now till—"

"Maybe I'll have still another surprise for him."

After lunch he returned to the mine and worked carefully in one side and out the other. But he found nothing even as likely-looking as he'd tested that morning. Reluctant to go back with the bad news, he sat on the dump, smoking.

Rising, presently, he shouldered the shovel and started down the trail. Then the truck he recognized as Sligo's rattled into sight headed south. It came right past the store, but spotting Tom, Sligo slowed and stared balefully at both Tom and the mine entrance.

THAT evening, sitting with Janis and Barney in the old man's bedroom, Tom made a guarded report on the mine. "I'll take a few more looks," he promised. "I remember that one of my text-books mentioned that locating pay dirt of any kind—at least without the new scientific methods—is just a combination of luck and a good geological guess, and maybe—"

"There's a book somewheres around here," Barney cut it. "One o' them week-end gem hunters must have lost it out'n his car. Anyhow, Sligo found it in the road and brung it in a while back. You seen it, Janis?"

She hadn't, but promised a search, in case it might be of some help to Tom.

"Could be," he said.

He lay long awake, and when he did finally doze off it was to dream fitfully of hard-rock mining, hard-faced Sligo, and a gal who was hard to leave. Some time after midnight the chill wind bore the acrid odor of burning greasewood, but after speculating for a while on its possible origin he slept again till sunrise.

It was only after he'd eaten and nearly reached the mine that he remembered that

smell of smoke, for again the faint odor bit at his nostrils, growing stronger as he climbed the trail.

He stopped short, staring, as pick and shovel fell from his hands. The smoke tree was a smouldering ruin. The entrance to the shaft was caved in, and from the rubble the charred end of a collapsed supporting timber protruded.

He thought first of his pipe. Perhaps, yesterday afternoon, he'd been careless while smoking there and the night wind had fanned—No, that wasn't likely. The old dump on which he'd been resting was bare of inflammable material; and besides, he'd lived too long in arid country to toss aside an unextinguished match stick or burning tobacco. Sligo had made this fire, to warn Tom that he'd better clear out. *He saw me leaving. Sligo wanted an open field as far as Janis—and the mine—were concerned.*

Slipping and sliding down to the sandy little-used road, he found tracks of a heavy truck. Following them south around a bend, he saw where they turned off behind a clump of arrow-weeds. Probably Sligo had got cold while awaiting darkness, for a small fire had been kindled. And footprints led across the road and were lost on the hard shale of the slope.

Tom looked no further. He would dig the damned entrance clear again and to hell with Sligo. But now he needed a man-size pick, so he headed for the store.

Janis was madder than a singed cat, but they didn't tell Barney. Armed with a pick and crowbar, Tom went to work on the ruin. Soon his hands were blistered and his back ached, and the discomfort added to his anger. Finally, cussing like a rusty windmill, he jabbed the bar under a boulder and heaved. It gave a bit and he tried again and again. At last it rolled downhill.

With heart slugging at his ribs he slumped down and stared absently into the depression. A bit of color caught his eye. Looking closer he brushed aside some loose particles of crumbly rock. *It was probably a piece of old green bottle,* he decided, seeing the the smooth surface.

Using his knife he tried to pry it loose, but it wouldn't pry, and now he saw that it wasn't glass. His pulse rate hit a new high, and hurriedly bringing the geologist's pick he carefully worked the chunk of stuff loose. Wiping it off with his bandanna he saw that it was some variety of quartz, translucent, with a wax-like luster. "What the hell?" he muttered. "There's a whole tubful right here."

By the time he'd taken out a few more samples it was noon, and he hustled down to the store. "Look!" he whispered to Janis. "I haven't the slightest idea what this is, but—Did you find that book your uncle mentioned?"

She hadn't, and all afternoon they searched. "Wouldn't it kill you?" she fretted as, tired and dusty, they knocked off to

"You mean the only reason you wanted to reach this water hole was so you could go fishing?!!!"

get supper. "Maybe we've got a gem mine and don't know it."

"Unlikely as a June frost in Mexicali," Tom sighed. "I know what tourmaline, kunzite, beryl and rose-quartz look like, but this is none of those. Probably it's worthless, but I'd like to identify it."

"FIND anything, Bub?" Barney asked after supper.

With a shrug Tom handed him one of the crystals.

"Hmmm, likely good-fer-nothin' as a four-card flush." Barney turned it over and over in his hands. "Wonder how come such stuff happened."

"Well, as I remember reading—" Tom sat down—"Millions of years ago, during convulsions of some sort way down under—" Briefly he told of superheated water being forced up through rock crevices under such terrific pressure that it melted certain minerals in the rock. When the rock cooled, these minerals crystallized in pockets. Some, called vugs, are no larger than a teacup; others are small caves.

"Dogged if you don't know more'n you think you do about minin' and such," Barney declared.

"But I don't know enough to identify this stuff. If we could just find that book—"

"Shucks, it jest came to mind where it is," Barney broke in. "Janis, look under the back corner of that dresser. One leg got busted off and I stuck the book in there to prop it."

Promptly the torn and dusty volume was rescued, and Janis and Barney sat silent as Tom hunted through it. Finally he looked up, and there was a puzzled expression on his face. "It almost fits the description of a stuff called chalcedony," he sighed. "But chalcedony is usually pale blue or grey."

"Darn," Janis mourned. "But maybe—"

"Wait!" Tom leaned nearer the lamp. "Here it is! Chrysoprase, a light green chalcedony. Very rare."

"Well, what do you know?" Janis' eyes were wide. "I wonder how much—"

Tom stood up. "A pencil note here on the margin says seventy-five an ounce!"

"Dollars?" Janis gasped.

"Hell, no," Barney scoffed. "'Tain't worth more'n gold. That's certain. Seventy-five cents is more like it. How much this chunk weigh?"

On a high lope the young people lit out for the store where, on the crude old scale, the piece of chrysoprase balanced a twelve-ounce weight.

"This one piece is worth nine bucks," Tom reported to Barney. "It's nearly a perfect crystal, though. Allowing for cloudy and otherwise flawed ones which jewelers probably wouldn't buy, I'd say there's maybe two hundred dollars' worth in that one hole I've found; and maybe there are more holes."

"Well, that ain't no fortune, but it ain't hay either, even though half of it's yours. Now, don't say you won't take it!" Barney added in a louder voice as Tom started to protest. "Hadn't been fer you I wouldn't a-had nothin'. What you laughin' at, Janis?"

"Pete Sligo." She wiped her eyes. "In trying to make trouble for us he wrecked the mine entrance—"

"The hell you preach!"

"That's right," Tom chortled. "He not only turned up this stuff which we otherwise wouldn't have found, right over our heads, but it seems he also provided the book which tells us it's worth money."

"But how do we turn it into cash?"

For a moment Tom pondered. "Tomorrow I'll go up to Blythe," he said. "Most any jeweler can give me the name of a buyer of semi-precious and ornamental gems. Then I'll write and find out how to go about selling what we've got, and what more I can find in the meantime. You got a gun of some sort, in case Sligo comes while I'm gone?"

"I got one and sure will be up to use it should he come," Barney declared.

BUT fortunately, next morning, Sligo's truck lumbered past toward Blythe shortly before Tom was ready to start, and Tom trailed along just out of sight. Finally, upon topping a rise, he stopped abruptly, backed a little and set his hand brake. Then he walked forward until he could see the truck. It was once more in motion; and two men, crouched, were poking a rapid hole in the atmosphere down an arroyo.

The first thing Tom did in Blythe was to find a policeman. "There's a trucker named Sligo who makes several trips a week up here from Imperial Valley with garden stuff," he reported. "He comes the back way, by Chucawalla Store, and I suspect he gets up too early to see well and loads on a couple of Border-jumpers along with the cabbage and spinach. Twice I've spotted such passengers, and he's here in town right now. It's a big black truck with side-curtains, and—"

"I know the outfit." The cop nodded. "I'll contact the Border Patrol boys pronto. They'll keep an eye peeled and snag him next time he tries it. Thanks for the tip."

Then Tom found a reputable-looking jeweler and showed him one of the greenish crystals. "I think this is chrysoprase."

After carefully examining the specimen, the jeweler nodded.

"Is it with seventy-five cents an ounce?"

The jeweler regarded the lanky redhead as though he thought him too dumb to pour sand out of a boot. With a disgusted sigh he wagged his head.

Tom was coming to a boil. "Well, what is it worth?"

"Seventy-five dollars an ounce."

Tom's mouth fell open.

"That's right," the jeweler insisted. "Chrysoprase always was the rarest of semi-precious stones, and several years ago the last known deposit, up north of Indio, petered out. It looked as though there was no more. Consequently the always high price went still higher. How much of it have you?"

"About twenty thousand dollars' worth so far, and I wouldn't be surprised—Where can I sell it?"

"Well, being here on the desert, I've been asked by several jewelry manufacturers to let them know when anything of particular interest is found. I'll send some telegrams. Probably they'll each rush a buyer out on the first plane. This is Friday. Come back Monday and I'll likely have one or more customers for you. And I'd advise keeping mum about this find, or your place will be overrun with rock hounds and high-graders."

ITCHING to blurt the good news, Tom didn't wait for lunch, but lit out for the Chukawalla Store as though he carried the mail and was hours behind shedule. Lizards and road-runners scuttled out of his way, dust rose in a high cloud behind the spinning tires. He tore like a chased cat around a bend.

Then a lash of fear ripped through his guts. Jamming both feet to the floorboards, he jerked the hand brake and twisted the wheel. The front bumper smashed through the dry thorny stalks of a roadside ocatilla, the left rear fender crumbled against the big black truck stopped crosswise of the narrow road. *Sligo!*

Trembling with both shock and anger he clambered out. From around the rear end of the truck its owner appeared. In one hairy paw he gripped a rim wrench, and from the malevolence in the snake-like eyes Tom saw he was up against a twisted mentality who which would be satisfied with nothing less than killing his adversary and damn the consequences.

"I seen you in town and have been waitin'," Sligo announced through his teeth.

Tom's mind was working faster than jet propulsion. Sligo was a powerful but unskilled fighter; if Tom infuriated him still more and he'd be as clumsy as a bear on skates.

"Listen, you dumb so-and-so," Tom jeered, trying to keep his voice steady, and feeling his stomach tighten as Sligo moved toward him. "No horned toad like you can—"

With a howl Sligo raised the wrench and lunged. Abrupt as a thunder-clap Tom dived under the vicious lash of steel. As he crashed against Sligo's knees he grabbed, and they both went down like a landslide.

As the wrench smashed against Tom's spine he was almost paralyzed. His grip on Sligo's legs relaxed, and Sligo jerked free. With a desperate heave Tom scrambled forward, grabbing for the wrench. But Sligo rolled aside, and as Tom skidded on his face the trucker whipped a leg across the small of his back and ground his nose in the sand.

With a frantic twist Tom flung a handful of grit over his shoulder. "Ow!" Sligo howled, slackening a bit.

Quickly humping his back Tom heaved him off, sputtering and blinking, and before Sligo could see a thing Tom had turned on his knees and socked him, falling forward as the blow exploded on Sligo's chin. Clasped in each other's arms they were kicking and biting and rolling like a first-

class dog-fight when another car arrived.

"Here, you!" At the moment Tom happened to be outside, and was hauled to his feet, only to slump again as the hand let loose of his collar. Down he sat beside Sligo, who lay gasping and staring like a fish out of water.

With a weak swipe Tom brushed a trickle of blood from one eye and stared dumbly at the new arrivals. Both wore uniforms and packed guns. "Border Patrol," one said curtly, then turned toward the parked sedan. *"Viene aca!"*

Two scared, handcuffed Mexicans shambled forward. Promptly they identified Sligo as the one who had, for much *dinero*, sneaked them up from the Border. "We happened along just as they bulged out on the highway," the officer explained to Tom. "We took them on into Blythe where a cop flagged us down, told of the tip-off he'd got from you and said he'd seen this truck head back this way. You hurt much?"

"I can still travel." Tom got stiffly to his feet. . . .

True to his promise, Barney, with a gun handy, was in the store with Janis. "Oh!" she cried as Tom limped in.

"Hell's bells!" Barney rose from his chair. "You must have jest about lost a decision to a freight train. What happened?"

Leaning against the counter, Tom smiled weakly. "Tangled with Sligo and he's headed for the cooler. But those crystals are worth—" Quickly he told of his talk with the jeweler.

"Lord A'mighty!" Barney exhulted, reaching for Tom's battered right hand. "I always knowed there was somethin' good cached here at Chukawalla."

"You were right." Tom flung a warm look at the nice dish. "But it's not any chrysoprase."

KNOW YOUR WEST

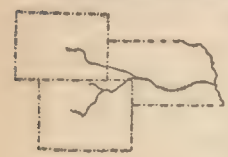
1. Are cowbells commonly used on range cattle?

2. Though not in very common use, most cowboys would recognize a romal (roh-MAHL) if they saw one. What is it?

3. There are some queer place names in the West: in what Southwestern state would you find the following: Shungpavy, Betatakin, Bapchule, Ft. Huachuca, Chin Lee, Show Low, Salome and Tombstone?

4. To what do the terms crossbuck, aparejo (ah-pah-RAY-hoh) and kyack refer?

5. Suppose you traveled down-river all the way from Casper, Wyo., to Plattsmouth, Nebr., some 20-odd miles south of Omaha, what river well known to old-time trail drivers would you be following?



6. When the boss sent a couple of cowhands to *locate* a bunch of cattle in the Pussycat Mesa country, did he mean they were to look for cattle?

7. What is the upper shoulder-structure of a horse commonly called?

8. This one is for you old-timer rodeo fans: in which rodeo event were the following arena cowboys of yesteryear famous top-hands: Shorty Kelso, Dee Bibb, Slim Caskey, Yakima Canutt, Booger Red Jr., Bill Pickett, Powder-Face Tom Eckert, Mike Hastings, Oklahoma Curley?

9. For what special purpose are saddles made with a long, smooth, forward-slanting horn, a long seat and a very low, almost flat cantle?

10. What cow country state has more miles of railroad than any other state in the Union?

——*Rattlesnake Robert*

You will find the answers to these questions on page 57. Score yourself 2 points for each question you answer correctly. 20 is a perfect score. If your total is anywhere from 16 to 20, you're well acquainted with the customs and history of the cow-country. If your total score is anywhere from 8 to 14, you will have things to learn. If you're below 8, better get busy polishing up your knowledge of the West.

The Courting of Molly

By ***PHILIP KETCHUM***

AFTER Joe Evans had spent two years getting his ranch established, he came down out of the hills to find a wife. This was his avowed intention and he talked it over with Tom Sturgis just as he would any other business matter.

"It gets pretty lonesome up there on my place," Joe admitted. "I figure it might be kinda nice to have a woman around. Sam Barker is going to look after things for me until I can find one."

A banker has many strange propositions

A DOG and a fiddle are a man's best bet—till he falls in love

thrown at him, but this just about topped anything Tom Sturgis had faced. "You mean you want my help?" he asked slowly.

"Well, I thought you might kinda steer me," Joe admitted. "You know most of the folks around San Esteban. Where will I find her?"

"What kind of wife do you want?"

"One who can cook," said Joe promptly. "One who can laugh. A woman with long, dark hair and a song in her eyes."

He broke off what he was saying and moved closer to the window and Tom stood up and looked out. The Hollenbeck wagon was passing the bank, was heading up the street out of town. Dan Hollenbeck was driving and Molly was beside him. Her head was thrown back and she was laughing at something her father had said.

"A woman like that," Joe muttered. "Who is she, Mr. Sturgis?"

"Molly Hollenbeck," Tom answered.

"Is she married?"

"No."

"Then she's the one I want. Where does she live?"

Tom sat down again, shaking his head. "Not so fast, Joe. Not so fast."

"There's nothing the matter with her, is there?" Joe insisted.

"Not a thing so far as I know."

"You mean her father might object?"

"Not exactly."

"Then what's wrong?"

Tom leaned back in his chair and stared at Joe Evans. He was about twenty-seven or twenty-eight. He was short, stocky, and had a square, stubborn-looking face. Tom had a fair notion of his ability. He had taken a place up in the hills which had broken several other men and he had made a go of it. He wasn't afraid of work. He was young and strong and steady and he deserved a better break than a fruitless courtship of Molly Hollenbeck.

"Well?" Joe demanded.

"Listen, Joe. Molly's a mighty attractive girl and you're not the first young man who's noticed it," Tom said. "She lives on a ranch with her father about five miles northeast of town. Dan Hollenbeck has a hundred and sixty acres, most of it in potatoes and beans. He works it alone and with what free help he can get, and from all I hear he gets plenty of free help from the men who want to marry Molly."

"How?" Joe asked.

"Like this. If you call on Molly at night he'll say she's tired and has gone to bed and ask you to come around during the day. If you arrive during the day he'll say she's busy and ask you to come out and work with him until supper time. You'll do it and if you do you'll get to see Molly at supper, but right afterwards, off to bed she goes."

"And Molly stands for that?"

Tom chuckled. "She told me once that the right man would find a way to break down Dan's system, but no one's busted it yet."

That was the wrong thing to say. Joe Evans sucked in a long, deep breath and his lips tightened stubbornly. He said, "Where, exactly, is the Hollenbeck ranch?"

"Five miles northeast," Tom answered. "On the Benson road, just this side of Indian creek."

Joe Evans nodded. He said, "Mr. Sturgis, I'm going to marry that girl. You're invited to the wedding."

JOE RODE out there that night. It was after dark when he got to the Hollenbeck ranch and he knew what to expect, but he dismounted, tied his horse at the gate and walked up to the front door and knocked.

Dan Hollenbeck opened the door. Dan was a big man, broad-shouldered, husky. He had a scowl on his face but the scowl was habitual.

Joe grinned at him. "You don't know me, Mr. Hollenbeck," he said easily, "but my name's Joe Evans and I have a place up in the hills. I saw you and your daughter as you were leaving town, today, and Mr. Sturgis told me where you lived. I just sort of came by to pay you a visit."

"You mean you came by to see Molly," Dan Hollenbeck growled.

"Sure," Joe agreed. "To see Molly."

Dan Hollenbeck shook his head. "We

go to bed early around here. We're working folks. If you want to see Molly you have to get here while it's light."

"Tomorrow, then?" Joe suggested.

A brief grin tugged at the corners of Dan Hollenbeck's mouth. "Tomorrow. Make it in the morning."

Joe said that he would be by in the morning and he walked back to his horse after Dan Hollenbeck had closed the door. He hadn't even caught a glimpse of Dan's daughter.

Dan had said to make it in the morning, and Joe was there just after the sun came up. Dan Hollenbeck was a little surprised. None of the other young men who had come out here wanting to see his daughter had ever been so early. He almost invited Dan in for a cup of coffee, but his system had never failed him and he didn't think it would this time.

"Molly's pretty busy right now," he said to Joe. "Suppose we go out and do a little work in the field. I've got an extra hoe. We can talk some. Get acquainted."

Joe was supposed to agree to that. Any suitor was supposed to want to make a good impression on Molly's father but Joe Evans didn't nod his head and start around toward the barn.

"I'll just wait here," he said to Dan Hollenbeck. "I'll wait until Molly's not busy."

The scowl on Dan Hollenbeck's face deepened. "What's the matter?" he demanded. "You afraid of work?"

"Not at all," Joe said promptly, "but I didn't come out here to work. I came to see Molly."

"And I said she was busy."

"Then I'll help her," Joe said, grinning. "After all, Molly's the one I want to marry. Not her father."

A flush of anger showed in Dan Hollenbeck's cheeks. "I'll have my Molly courted by no loafers," he shouted. "If you can't work, get out of here. Get off my land and stay off."

"I can work, Mr. Hollenbeck," Joe said quietly. "I'll make a bargain with you. Give me an hour with Molly and I'll give you an hour of work."

Dan Hollenbeck's fists were clenched. He moved forward threateningly. "I make no bargains," he grated. "Get off of my land."

"I want to see Molly."

"And I say no. Get off of my land."

Joe retreated to the gate where he had tied his horse and Dan Hollenbeck followed him. Back of Dan the door opened and Molly looked out, her eyes wide with interest. Joe waved to her and called, "Hi, Molly. I'm Joe Evans. Glad to meet you."

Dan Hollenbeck rushed at him but Joe ducked around his horse and swung into the saddle. "I'll be back, Molly," he called to the girl.

"You come sneaking around here and I'll fill you full of buckshot," Dan Hollenbeck yelled.

"I don't sneak," Joe answered. "Watch for me. I'll be back."

JOE RETURNED to San Esteban before noon and was busy the rest of the day. Tom Sturgis saw him early in the evening and he told Tom what had happened and what he meant to do. He was pretty serious and even a little excited.

"I saw her again, Mr. Sturgis," Joe said. "She's all right. She's the girl I want."

"Dan can be mean," Tom warned.

"And I can be stubborn," Joe answered. "You're still invited to the wedding."

Tom didn't see Joe leave the next morning but as he heard it Joe pulled out just after dawn, driving a wagon load of lumber, with two men he had hired riding high on the load. He took the Benson road and stopped opposite the Hollenbeck ranch and he was pacing off measurements when Dan Hollenbeck came across the road with fire in his eyes.

"What's the meaning of this?" Dan roared. "What are you going to do with that lumber?"

"Build a house," Joe answered.

"You can't build a house here."

"You're wrong, Hollenbeck. I've got to. I filed a claim on this place at the land office. The law says I've got to make improvements."

"But you've already got a place up in the hills."

Joe Evans was grinning. "Maybe I'll give that place up, Mr. Hollenbeck. Maybe I'll decide I like it here better."

"You can't raise anything here. You don't have water."

"Then I guess I'll have to farm dry."

Dan glared at the younger man. He shook his fist in Joe's face. "This is just a trick," he yelled. "You can't get away with it."

"I can get by with it until I see Molly," Joe grinned.

The two men Joe had hired had unloaded the lumber and Joe showed them where he wanted his house. He had made his measurements close to the road, as close to Hollenbeck's place as he could get, and while Dan Hollenbeck paced back and forth, fuming, and shouting about what he was going to do to Joe, the house started up. It was finished the next day and while it wasn't much of a house it at least had four walls and a roof and a window and a door and inside there was a bunk and a stove on the first floor.

The night the house was finished, Joe crossed the road to Hollenbeck's and knocked on the door. Dan and his daughter had been to town that day and Dan had called at the land office and verified the claim Joe had filed. It hadn't made him feel any better to discover that the claim was in perfect order and there wasn't anything he could do about it.

"Get back across the road," Dan shouted when he saw who was at the door. "Get back across the road and stay there."

Joe Evans grinned. "Can't I see Molly for a while?"

"I said get back across that road."

"But I want to see Molly," Joe insisted.

Dan Hollenbeck glared at him. "You've got that land across the road," he said grimly. "You've got it and there's nothing I can do about it. Stay on it if you want to. Stay on it until you starve, but keep on your own side of the road. If I find you on my land again I'll blast you with my shotgun."

Joe Evans looked sad. "You're making a mistake, Mr. Hollenbeck," he said slowly. "We're neighbors, now, and neighbors ought to be friendly. It's gonna be mighty lonesome across the road."

Dan Hollenbeck snorted. He slammed the door in Joe's face.

Joe walked back across the road. One of the men who had worked for him had made a late trip from town with a load of supplies and among other things had brought him a dog. The dog was on a leash inside the house. Joe brought the dog outside and tied the leash to a peg at the corner of the house. He went inside again and got his fiddle, and brought it outside. After that there was nothing to do but wait.

The lights in the Hollenbeck house were put out about an hour later and as soon as the place was dark, Joe went to work. He wasn't very good on a fiddle but he could get noise from it, plenty of noise, and the dog, at least, appreciated what he was playing, for he pointed his nose at the sky and howled. Joe swung into another piece. The dog went on howling. Joe slowed the tempo of his playing and the dog's howl grew more mournful.

Across the road a window of the Hollenbeck house flew open and Dan stuck his head out. He was wearing a white night cap and was clearly visible in the light of the moon.

"Cut out that infernal noise," he roared. "Let a man get a little sleep."

"Give me an hour with Molly," Joe answered, "and you can sleep all night."

Dan jerked his head back inside and slammed the window shut. Joe struck up a tune on his fiddle. The dog started howling.

This went on, and at the end of an hour Joe stopped for a brief rest and to give Dan Hollenbeck a chance to get to sleep. But that was all. A brief rest and he started playing again. He kept playing, off and on that first night, until after two o'clock.

THE NEXT day was clear and bright and warm, and when Dan Hollenbeck came outside after breakfast he stared across the road and saw Joe painting his house. Joe was painting it a vivid red. He

was about half done with the front of it and he waved his paint brush at Dan and called out, "Hi, neighbor. It's a great morning, isn't it?"

Dan Hollenbeck sucked in a sharp, quick breath. He stared at Dan's house. He didn't remember having once told Archie Mayo at the general store in San Esteban that he couldn't stand anything painted red, and it didn't occur to him that Joe Evans might have talked to Archie.

"Well, what do you think of it?" Joe yelled.

Dan made no answer. He couldn't trust himself to make any answer.

"How's Molly this morning?" Joe wanted to know.

Dan turned and stalked around the house. He grabbed his hoe and headed for the bean field, and suddenly he stopped and looked back. Joe had quit painting and was standing in the road in front of his house. He was calling Molly. Dan went tearing for the house. He charged inside and came out with his shotgun.

"Keep away from here," he roared at Joe Evans. "Keep away from here or I'll use this gun on you."

"I'm on my own side of the road, Mr. Hollenbeck," Joe called back.

Dan Hollenbeck fingered his gun. He sat down on the front steps and laid it across his knees. Joe stepped back to his house and picked up his paint brush. After a time Dan started again for the bean field, but the moment he left the porch Joe put down the paint brush and came out to the road and Dan had to return to the porch. This went on all morning. Joe got his house painted. Dan Hollenbeck didn't accomplish anything.

In the afternoon Dan worked around the house where he could keep an eye on Joe Evans, and that night there was another serenade which went on intermittently until almost morning. In the morning, Dan hitched up the wagon and he and Molly went to town. Tom Sturgis saw them just before noon and talked to Dan while Molly was busy in the store. Dan's eyes were bloodshot and he looked tired but there was a stubborn scowl on his face. He told Tom everything that had happened so far.

"I came in to talk to the sheriff," he admitted. "I won't put up with it, Sturgis. I tell you I won't."

Sturgis asked him what the sheriff had said and he answered that the sheriff had promised to talk to Joe Evans. "Talk to him, hell!" Dan growled. "What Evans needs is a mighty good old-fashioned thrashing."

"Or you might let him talk to Molly," Tom suggested.

"Never. No daughter of mine is going to be pestered by a young whippersnapper like Joe Evans."

"Joe is a pretty steady young man," Tom countered.

"Did you ever hear him play a fiddle?" Dan snapped.

Tom grinned; he couldn't help it. "What does Molly think?" he demanded.

Dan shook his head. "Don't ask me. Just look at her face when she comes out of the store. He's got her dazzled. A young girl in love—if you can call it love—doesn't have any judgement."

Molly came out of the store just about that time. Her cheeks were pink and there was a bright sparkle in her eyes and she was laughing. She talked to me for a minute but all the time she was talking she was looking past me down the street to where Joe Evans had tied the wagon he had rented. Joe Evans had followed them into town.

"I'm fixed up for his fiddle playing, anyhow," Dan said as he and Molly left. "See this?" He showed me a package.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Cotton," he answered. "Cotton for my ears."

As Dan Hollenbeck and Molly drove out of town, Joe Evans followed them. He waved to Tom Sturgis and called a greeting. Tom could see into his wagon.

"What have you got there, Joe?" he shouted at him.

The grin on Joe's face widened. "Just some stuff I'm going to dispose of," he answered. "I've got to do something to keep busy."

WHEN the serenade started that night, Dan Hollenbeck stuffed his ears with cotton. He wadded in the cotton until he couldn't hear a thing and then he opened his window. The sound of the fiddle and the howling dog was barely distinguishable.

"Keep it up," he shouted through the window. "Play until your arm drops off and see if it bothers me."

If there was any answer from Joe Evans he couldn't hear it. Joe had started a fire across the road and was burning something, but he was still playing his fiddle and Dan paid little attention to the fire. He got into bed and pulled up the covers and suddenly was aware of a terrible odor. He sat up, sniffed, threw back the blankets, got to his feet and moved to the window. The smell was coming through the window and it was too much to stand. Dan stared at the fire across the road and abruptly he identified the smell. Joe Evans was burning a hide, a green hide, and a gentle south wind carried the awful odor of the burning hair and skin straight to Dan's house.

He slammed down the window but the closed window didn't keep out the smell. He got back into bed and pulled the covers over his head but he couldn't sleep that way. He could muffle the sound of the fiddle and the howling dog with cotton in his ears but he couldn't stuff his nose and throat with cotton. There was no way to escape the smell.

The wind was still from the south the next morning and Joe was still burning hides. Dan Hollenbeck had his breakfast. He didn't enjoy a bite of it. The awful smell seemed to permeate the food. It spoiled the taste of his coffee. Dan ate in a hurry and went outside. Joe Evans was stirring up his fire and getting ready to put on a fresh hide.

"Do you have to burn those things?" Dan shouted.

Joe shook his head. "Nope. I could talk to Molly instead."

"How many of those hides have you got?"

"About a hundred. I reckon I can burn up about three a day. Mr. Hollenbeck. I've got to pick a time when the wind's right. I don't like the way they smell."

"I don't either," Dan roared.

Joe tossed a fresh hide on the fire. A fresh hide didn't make the smell any worse but it seemed to. Dan glared at him. He knew there was no point in arguing with Joe Evans. He knew there was no law against a man burning hides. He turned and stalked back to the house, praying that the wind would change.

The wind didn't change. Day after day it blew steadily from the south, picking up that terrible odor and throwing it against his house.

And Dan was getting no work done. If he went out in the fields during the day Joe called Molly from the road and Molly was always at one of the windows, ready to talk to him. Strangely enough, Molly didn't seem to mind the awful smell. She went around the house singing.

The cotton in Dan's ears wasn't working so well now, either. The sound of Joe's fiddle worked past it if the cotton wasn't packed in tight. And if the cotton was packed in tight, it hurt.

Besides all this, there was that hideous red house just across the road, ruining the view of the valley.

Dan Hollenbeck considered these things, turning them over in his mind. He sat on his porch and stared across the road at Joe Evans. It occurred to him, suddenly, that Joe wasn't a very big man. He looked husky but he didn't have the broad shoulders and long arms which Dan had, and he wasn't nearly so heavy. "I could lick him in a fight," Dan said under his breath. "That's the answer. I could lick him in a fight."

Dan Hollenbeck got abruptly to his feet and walked out to the road. He called, "Hey, Joe Evans. Come here a minute."

Joe poked up his fire and then stepped to the road. An impudent grin was on his face. "Do I get to see Molly?" he asked bluntly.

"That's what you want, isn't it?"

Joe shook his head. "Nope. I want to marry her."

"No man will ever marry her who can't lick her father," Dan grated. "I'll make a bargain with you, Evans. We'll fight it out right here, man to man. If you win you get to see Molly. If you lose you put out that fire, tear down that awful house, smash your fiddle and take your dog and get out of the country."

Joe's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "We fight it out, nothing barred?"

"Nothing barred."

"Right now?"

"Right now is as good a time for me as any."

"Then that's the way it will be, Mr. Hollenbeck," Joe agreed. "It's a good bargain."

Dan Hollenbeck didn't wait for any more talk. He lunged forward and wrapped his huge arms around Joe's body and Joe didn't even try to get out of the way. He hooked a foot behind Dan's legs and they fell to the ground. Dan tightened his grip. There was a terrific power in his arms and shoulders, power enough to crush a man's chest, but Joe wasn't fighting as Dan had expected. Joe's fingers were digging into his ribs, moving up and down his sides, tickling him, and suddenly driving him crazy. There was no power in his thick arms when he was being tickled. He released his hold on Joe. His body twitched and jerked as he tried to roll free but Joe was sitting on him, holding him down and Joe's fingers were still digging into his ribs.

This wasn't fighting. This wasn't what he had meant. He slammed a fist at Joe's face but the blow was ineffective and suddenly he was screaming at Joe to let him up, begging Joe to let him up or to at least stop tickling him. But Joe didn't stop. Joe didn't stop until all Dan's strength was gone and he was lying there in the road, helpless.

TOM STURGIS was invited to the wedding, as Joe Evans had promised. They made a handsome couple, Joe and Molly. After the ceremony was over and they had started for Joe's place up in the hills, Dan drew Tom aside and told him about the fight.

"I could lick him in a fist fight," Dan declared. "I could lick him with one hand tied behind me, but when he started in tickling, I didn't have a chance."

"How did he know you were ticklish?" Tom asked.

"He learned it from Molly. You know, Sturgis, putting cotton in my ears wasn't so smart after all. It kept out the sounds of the fiddle but it also kept out the sounds of Molly leaving almost every night to meet him. Joe Evans is a fellow to look ahead. He figured he might have to fight me and he talked it over with Molly. That's how he learned I was ticklish."

"Dan," Tom said, "it's a good match. They'll get along all right."

Dan Hollenbeck nodded. He sniffed the air and a scowl came over his face. "Can you smell it?" he demanded.

Tom sniffed the air. "Smell what?"

"Hides," Dan muttered. "Green hides, burning. I'm afraid I'll always smell those hides—but there's one thing I'm putting an end to right now. Come outside."

Tom followed Dan to the barn and from a corner where he had hidden it he took Joe's fiddle. "Here's a pelasure no one can deny me," he said grimly. For a moment he stared at the fiddle, then lifting it above his head he brought it down against the edge of one of the stalls, shattering the fiddle to a thousand pieces.

Don't Miss This Month's Extra Issue

THE THIRD OCTOBER NUMBER

Veiled Courage

By AUSTIN CORCORAN

LA SENORITA Mascara's dancing feet carried her right out of a framed picture of murder—and into robust cowman arms

HARRY had known it was sure to happen some day. But he'd never imagined he'd bump into one of Butch Kessler's bunch in Cerritos.

He'd been on the lookout every time he made a trip to Kansas City or Denver with a cattle shipment, or over to Seco City for the annual cowboy reunion, wherever he was in a crowd. But never until that morning had Harry Scott glimpsed a single member of the gang busted up by the law eight years previously, some to serve sentences in the pen, others to fade hastily from the country where they had operated under Kessler's command.

For the first time since he got a cowpuncher's job on Willow Springs Ranch, Harry felt the chill and the tingling along his spine that had assailed the fifteen-year-old boy who fled alone from the raided outlaw headquarters. Not that he was panicked—but the sudden appearance of this figure from a past Harry had done his best to bury was a jolt.

He halted to gaze after the tall, erect

"I can't take it off," she said. "I have no clothes."

figure going with swinging strides along the street. It was Brick all right. The same crisp, red hair, and that same look of physical perfection which marked him among all the men Harry Scott had ever known. Watching him now set in motion a swift kaleidescope of memories.

SCOTT was a boy again, startled awake in the dead of night by the rumble of men's voices and the trampling of their booted feet on the downstairs floor of the Kessler ranch house. He could feel the darkness of the attic where he slept, heavy with undefined fears. He saw bunches of cattle being hazed into hidden nooks, and trucks rolling from those secret places out over the highways with piles of freshly killed beef carcasses. Young calves were being hastily branded with marks other than those worn by the mothers. He saw a younger Brick, a bright, hard look in his eyes, and he heard Kessler saying, "Toughest bird I ever knew."

"Hi, Port!" Harry hailed a slim, sharp-nosed fellow who came from a nearby store. "Know that guy?" He jerked a thumb towards the tall, receding figure.

"Sure. That's Dick Beaumont, Don Welby's pardner. Didn't you know they bought the old Pete Hanson place and fixed it into a roadhouse, the Corral? Eat, dance—you can find every kind of amusement there. Got a good bar and a coupla side rooms where you can rib up a poker game."

"Been branding and settling the cattle on summer range. This is my first trip to town for a couple of months," Harry said. "Where'd those guys come from?"

"Came in here from Mexico, and were in California before that. Welby told me," Yates replied. Reporter on the weekly newspaper, he was a mine of information. "You ought to drop into the Corral this evening and see—hey! There she comes now!"

A rushing warmth chased the chill from his veins as Scott saw the girl coming toward them. Dressed entirely in black, she still was as striking as a tropical butterfly flitting along in front of the drab store buildings. Her small, sandalled feet seemed scarcely to touch the walk. The folds of her thin skirt tossed in the breeze, revealing smooth, rounded knees and legs that would stir Hollywood envy. A wide-brimmed hat concealed her hair. And over the upper part of her face was a lacy, black mask that hid all but a mouth and a dimpled chin that made a fellow think of kisses.

As she passed them, Scott caught and held for a second a glance from the eyes behind the mask. They were a deep, brilliant blue. He felt as if electric sparks flashed from nerve end to nerve end through his long body.

"*La Señorita Mascara,* from the Corral," Yates said. "She's never seen without the mask. Swell publicity stunt. She dances two or three Spanish numbers in costume during the evening. Occasionally she'll take a whirl with some fellow, but never the same one twice. All the single guys try to date her, and the girls are jealous as hell. I tell 'em to take it easy; probably she's Beaumont's girl. Welby's married."

She was part of the Corral bunch, tied in with Brick. Scott resented that, resented her fascination and still more his own response to it.

Brick's luck had got him off with a short sentence. They lacked sufficient evidence to prove what everybody believed—that he had not only played a leading part in big cattle steals but had been a killer as well. Men like Brick didn't change. He'd still be playing a crooked game. Harry doubted if he had been recognized. In growing to manhood he'd changed enough so more than a passing glance would be needed to identify him, and Brick was too smart to draw attention to himself by giving Scott away. But that reflection didn't dull the foreboding inspired by the presence in Cerritos of the man who called himself Dick Beaumont.

SCOTT delayed getting his supper until late. Then he headed for the Corral. He'd give Brick a real chance to recognize him. Better get it over with than go on with nagging expectation that it would happen some time.

Pulling into the lot alongside the corral he passed a number of both tourist and local cars before finding a spot to park. He turned, then backed in close to the building. As he got out he had an uncomfortable feeling that he was being watched. But a searching glance discovered nobody in the lot and the few windows in the wall were either of frosted glass or covered by draperies. Scott dismissed the feeling as being caused by his edginess about Brick.

He halted in the Corral entrance to size up the big room which had been semi-divided by a pole fence and gateways. On one side were gaily painted tables and chairs among which waitresses were scurrying. At the left of the entrance was the rustic bar, and beyond that three doors were set in the wall. The center of the floor was devoted to dancing, music being supplied by a record machine in the rear.

Porter Yates caught Scott's eyes and indicated a vacant chair at his table. Scott took it with some reluctance to being that close to Yates' observant eye. He remarked

with a grin that *la Mascara* would soon dance; then added the information that the buxom, capable-looking brunette at the cash register was Mrs. Welby. Her husband was standing by the bar, a small, negligible man whose only claim for notice was a pair of alert, black eyes and a strikingly affable smile.

Beaumont was not in sight. Momentarily expecting his appearance, Scott watched the three doors while he ate. He was finishing his meal when the middle door opened for the exit of several men. They had the appearance of a bunch who had been sitting in on a long poker session, and they didn't act as if any had been a particularly big winner. Beaumont appeared in the doorway and the last man out turned back to speak to him. Scott recognized Mayor Jackson's son Tom. Then the two went inside and the door closed behind them.

"Tom's trying to get in with the Corral outfit," Yates said, "He's gone clear off his beam over *la Señorita.*"

As he spoke, the first door opened and she appeared on the threshold. She was wearing a full-skirted, yellow costume, her softly curling brown hair caught up by a golden comb. It seemed to Scott that she was looking straight at him through the slits in her mask.

Then she turned to glance over the room, curtsied, waved a hand gaily and ran to change the record. Scott forgot everything but the graceful, twirling figure and it seemed less than five minutes later when she had finished her dance, taken an encore and was curtseying again, before disappearing through the doorway.

When she had gone, he came from his daze sufficiently to make fairly sensible replies to Yates' comments, pick up his check and pay the cashier. It was the hardness he glimpsed in her dark eyes that roused him.

"Dam Brick and the whole bunch!" he thought, his bootheels hitting the floor with hard thumps as he made for the exit.

It was dark in the parking lot, but a car that was pulling out swung around so the lights struck his sedan. They also revealed that its right front tire was flat. Going close, Scott stooped and extended a hand to make sure. As his fingers touched the rubber casing he heard two sharp explosions. Straightening with a snap, he stared towards the Corral, from which the sounds had come. Two of the windows were lighted but no further sounds came to his ears and there was no visible movement beyond the frosted glass.

Turning, he ran swiftly back to the street and around to the entrance, but inside there was no indication of disturbance.

"I've sure got one of those phobia bugs about Brick and his pals," Scott thought. "Makes me imagine things every time I get near any of 'em."

Turning, he got his car and angled across the road to a service station that kept late hours.

The puncture took time to locate, and more than an hour passed before the tire was back on the wheel. The Corral dining room had closed, but the dance floor was awhirl with couples, and two barmen were on the jump to hand out drinks. Scott got into his car and sent it whisking from the lot with a speed that spattered gravel like hail pellets.

IT WAS good to be rolling over the familiar road toward Willow Springs Ranch. Every revolution of the wheels was taking him farther from Brick and unwelcome memories. Scott had been riding for Frank Howard for eight years, and had almost forgotten his young indiscretion in hanging out with Kessler's bunch. He was Howard's right hand man, now, respected in the community of Cerritos.

Turning from the main road into a winding lane, he halted at a gate that cut off the ranch premises from open range. Scott sprang to the ground, swung the plank barrier open, and was stepping into the car when his eye caught a movement in the rear seat. He stared at the dim mass of boxes and bundles filling the back of the sedan. Then he flipped the door open and punched the dome light button. That wasn't the old plaid blanket kept in the car, it was a colored affair of Indian weave. And

something alive was inside the folds of it.

"Come out of there!" he ordered sternly.

The blanket heaved. There was a stirring of bundles heaped between the seats, and then two small, moccasined feet touched the running-board and a blanket-swathed figure was on the ground beside him.

"What're you doing in my car? Who are you?" he demanded.

"I'm running away," a soft, girl's voice replied frankly. "And you don't know me."

A small hand parted the blanket folds slightly and he glimpsed the finely-featured face of a girl who hadn't passed her teens. But she had moved beyond the luminance from the car light, drooped lashes shadowing her eyes, and he bent his head to make sure he didn't know her.

"Take that squaw drape off so I can get a good look at you," he said, holding his stern tone with an effort. A girl running away, so terrified she had to hide like that, aroused a sympathy Scott didn't think it wise to encourage. "Come on!" Reaching out, he grasped the blanket edge.

"No!" she pulled away determinedly. "I can't take it off. I haven't any clothes."

"Y-you h-haven't!" he stammered, staring at her in consternation. "Hey! What're you up to?" It cost no effort to speak sternly now.

The girl stiffened defiantly. "Don't speak to me like that!" she retorted. "They took my clothes away, and locked me in. I *had* to get away quick. There was only this couch cover. I wrapped in it, jumped out the window and hid in your car. Please take me some place where I can hide tonight. Just get me some levis and a shirt and I'll pull out of here tomorrow."

That almost got Scott. Damn the girl! She was spunky and appealing. But he sure as the devil couldn't take her to the house. Kind as Aunt Jennie Howard was, he wouldn't care to try explaining this kind of a stunt to her. He'd put her in the car and drive her straight back to Cerritos. Because he was sorry for her, in spite of warnings he believed to be common sense, he lashed at his anger to brace himself.

"Too bad," he said, his voice gruff, "but this is no way for a girl to skip from her folks. If you're in the right, go to the sheriff, he'll handle things for you."

"No!" The syllable fairly exploded.

IN HER excitement she stepped closer to the car and the light revealed her uplifted, defiant face, the dimpled chin, lovely mouth and brilliant blue eyes. Recognition hit Harry Scott like a wallop from a fist.

"La Señorita Mascara!" he exclaimed. Then he demanded sternly. "Why'd you pick on *me?* Get into *my* car?"

"Because," she looked at him squarely, "I'd seen you on the street. You looked kind—and dependable. I watched you from my dressing room window while you parked beside the Corral. I saw you in the dining room. When I had to run, I thought of your car. It seemed safe. I couldn't go far in this." She glanced down at the blanket.

"Why did you have to run all of a sudden like that?" Scott demanded, stung by sudden suspicion. "Brick—Beaumont didn't shoot at you, did he?"

Her face tautened. "No, no!" she said quickly. "Don't ask me why. I can't tell you. Just help me. . . . please!" The last word was merely a whisper, coming from tense, white lips.

"You're afraid of Beaumont?" Scott said.

"Yes." The answer came without hesitation, more impressive because Scott guessed this girl wasn't usually afraid.

Both were silent a moment. Then Scott said, "Get into the car. There's a cabin beyond the barn where you'll find a good bed. I think I can rustle you some small-sized stuff a kid left behind when he stayed here last summer. Keep under cover till I come for you. I'll see what I can do with Aunt Jennie. But you'd better make up your mind to talk."

"Thanks," she said, "I guess I—I'd have been sunk, if you turned me down." She scrambled into the back seat before he could reply.

Scott drove into the open shed where the car was kept. When the girl stood beside him again, he pointed to a small log cabin.

There were shots and Jackson fell against the table

"Scoot for that, and get inside quick."

Nodding for reply, she ran toward the shelter.

Scott entered the back door of the ranch house quietly. The Howards went to bed early and slept hard, but any unaccustomed sound might rouse them. Pulling off his boots, he stole softly across the kitchen to a door into the little room where the ranch visitor had stayed the previous summer. As he had hoped, the chest of drawers held levis and shirts as Jennie Howard had put them away after they were washed. Grabbing one of each he went back out and across the yard.

"Here's some stuff," he called softly at the door of the cabin.

It was opened so quickly he guessed she'd been watching from the window.

"Oh, thanks!" she said, gratitude and relief adding to the lilting inflection of her voice. A soft hand brushed Scott's as she took the clothes.

"Remember, don't show yourself till I come to you," he warned hastily, and turned before she could do any more talking.

It was a mess any way you looked at it—Harry Scott helping Brick's girl to run away. She'd been all right when she was doing the dance. Everything had been jake until she went back through that doorway. It wasn't long after that he'd heard the shots. Now he was sure of them. But he believed the girl's statement that she hadn't been fired on.

Scott's mouth was grim when he entered his room and faced the situation squarely. He was helping the masked señorita from the Corral to escape from Brick's bunch. Might as well face the fact that plenty was liable to be dragged into the open, if Brick caught on. But—Scott made his decision coolly—whatever happened, he wouldn't hand over this girl to the gang at the Corral.

THE FIRST sunrays were coming through his window and Scott heard a clattering of stove lids and skillets from the kitchen when he wakened. Aunt Jennie Howard had made the fire and was getting breakfast. He was instantly and uneasily aware of the girl's presence in the cabin across the yard. That was a situation he must meet without delay.

Rolling from bed, he scrambled into his clothes and headed through the living room to the kitchen, smoothing his thick black hair with his hands as he went.

"I overslept!" he exclaimed as Mrs. Howard glanced up with a smile from the bacon she was slicing.

She was a round woman with a plump, pink-cheeked face that appeared younger than her sixty-odd years. Her unhurried manner gave her an easy-going look which was belied by a firm chin and a certain glint behind the kindliness of her eyes. Jennie Howard wasn't the softie she might seem.

"I just started breakfast," she said. "Guess you got in late, and there wasn't any particular reason for hurry."

"Yes, there was," he replied. Better take the plunge quick. Aunt Jennie liked things in the open. "I brought a girl back with me," he announced bluntly. "She's out in the cabin."

Mrs. Howard halted with knife halfway through the bacon slab. "A girl?" she repeated. "How come, Harry? Who is she?"

"She's new around Cerritos," he said reluctant to mention the Corral, "and she had to get away from the folks she was with."

"How did you happen to mix into her running away?" Jennie Howard asked, giving him a penetrating look.

"She hid in my car," he replied with undoubted honesty. "I couldn't let her down, Aunt Jennie, she was really up against it." Scott's mouth quirked crookedly in a smile that begged her understanding. "I figured the best thing to do was to bring her along to the ranch and let you take over. Can I tell her to come in to breakfast?"

"I'll do that," Jennie said. "You finish slicing this bacon, and don't let the coffee boil over."

Scott knew from the unusual briskness of her manner that Mrs. Howard was impatient to size up the runaway. He filled a big frying pan with the meat slices, set

it on to cook and divided his attention between the stove and the window. In a surprisingly short space of time the two women emerged from the cabin. The girl looked very young with her brown curls swinging loose over the shoulders of a blue and yellow checkered shirt that was tucked neatly into the waistband of patched and faded levis.

As they crossed the yard Howard came from the barn, arriving at the kitchen steps close on their heels. The keen eyes below his shaggy white brows gave the girl a curious look, then went to his wife with a silent question.

"This is Linda Sheridan, Pa," she said. "She may visit us for a few days." No further explanation of Linda's presence on the ranch was offered.

Howard washed at the kitchen sink while Aunt Jennie finished getting breakfast on the table. Talk during the meal was impersonal, and Linda lost something of her look of strain, though the shadow in her blue eyes didn't lighten.

A hail from a man who rode into the yard took Howard outside as soon as he had finished. A quick, "Wait!" from Linda halted the others as they were pushing back their chairs.

"YOU'VE been awfully kind," she said, her gaze going from Scott to rest on Jennie Howard. "But I must tell you some things, before I stay here even a day. I'm past eighteen and have no legal guardian. My mother died when I was twelve, my father last fall. He was interested in mining and we lived in Mexico ever since I can remember. A year before Daddy died he became too ill to work and we went south to live. When . . . when he was gone, I stayed on with an old Spanish woman, Marta Valdez, where we'd lived." Eyes and voice testified that she was speaking the truth.

"I had almost no money," she went on, "and wasn't trained to do anything practical even if I could manage to leave Mexico. And I had no friends or relatives in the United States to come to. But I was desperate to return to my own country. Mr. and Mrs. Welby and Dick Beaumont came to stay for a short time in the little Mexican town, and offered to bring me away with them and give me work I could do. They came to Cerritos and opened the Corral. I could do little Spanish dances. I was known as *La Señorita Mascara.* I didn't like it much and was only staying until I could pay back the cost of bringing me from Mexico, and get a little stake. Then—" she hesitated, fingers twisting together and clutching tightly as she inhaled a long breath—"then," she went on with evident effort, "last evening something ter—very disagreeable happened. I couldn't stay there any longer. I had to get away quickly. I was so upset I couldn't think. It wasn't right to involve other people." She hesitated again, glancing at Scott. "And I'll go, right away, if—"

"You won't go a step, child!" Aunt Jennie broke in, "till we figure which way you're going to turn. Dancing in a roadhouse wasn't no place for you. I can imagine you was ready to get out of there in a hurry. If you've got things at the Corral you want, Harry'll go get 'em. Poor child, I guess you was so upset you just run out in your dancin' dress. I see Harry fixed you up with some of Billy's clothes, I recognized the patch I put on them pants." She laughed. "I'll find you something better'n them. But now I've got to go out and look after my chickens."

"She's a darling!" Linda exclaimed as Jennie went out through the yard door.

"She is that," Scott agreed. "And she's given the high sign, you're okay with her. Thanks for the explanation. I'll take it. But it doesn't go far enough for me. It wasn't something merely 'disagreeable' that made 'em take your clothes and lock you in last night. What was it?"

Sparks flashed through the shadow in Linda's eyes. "I've told you all you need to know," she said defiantly.

Grasping her shoulders, he held her firmly while his probing gaze searched her face and went deep into her eyes. "You were scared blue, but you didn't dare tell the sheriff and get his protection," Scott said with forceful gravity. "What did Brick —Dick Beaumont do?"

Linda shook her head mutely, her eyes still defiant.

Scott's grasp tightened. "There was some kind of a shooting scrape. I stood in the lot by my car, and I heard the shots. You were mixed up in it somehow. It won't hurt you to tell me, Linda." His voice took on a solemn note. "Please trust me. I want to protect you, and intend to. And I know that setup at the Corral, with Beaumont, can be pretty tough. Tell me!"

SHE EMITTED a long sigh and the defiance went from her eyes.

"Beaumont shot Tom Jackson," she said tonelessly. "I was there, in the hallway outside the card room door."

"My God!" Scott muttered. "All right, tell me the rest of it before Aunt Jennie comes back."

"Jackson and some other men had been playing poker—began in the afternoon," Linda went on. "Finally they got Beaumont in the game. I guess he won a lot, but there was no trouble. They broke up and all left but Tom Jackson. He came back in with Beaumont as I was going through the next door from the hallway, to do my dance. When I came back, they were quarreling in the first card room. I heard Jackson accuse Beaumont of cheating, and threaten to expose something in Beaumont's past.

"I could see only part of the room, past the edge of the curtain over the door. I saw Jackson's head and one shoulder, and beyond him Beaumont's head and part of his body. He said 'Damn you!' and they both seemed to jump, there were the shots and Jackson fell over against the table. I guess I gasped, for Beaumont jumped for the doorway and caught me."

"You poor kid!" Scott exclaimed, releasing his grasp to slide an arm around her and catch one of Linda's icy hands in a warm, reassuring clasp.

"Welby dashed in. He was furious at Beaumont. Ordered him to get right out on the dance floor. Then he shoved me in my dressing room. I was just out of my dance outfit when Beaumont flung the door open and grabbed that and my street dress. Said he was locking me in till the business was settled and if I ever told that Jackson had been shot he'd see that I got the blame for it." The sentences poured from Linda's lips until her voice broke on a dry sob.

Scott held her close, stroking her hair and talking quietly.

"You did the right thing, getting out of there," he told her.

"But I was a coward!" she exclaimed. "I should have gone to the sheriff."

"I dunno about that," Scott said, "Brick's a real bad one, no telling how he'd frame you."

"Why do you keep calling Dick Beaumont 'Brick'?" Linda asked.

Harry Scott's tanned face whitened as he broke the silence of eight long years. "I knew him once. . . . up in Wyoming. He did time in the Pen. I've been a coward, too, Linda. I kidded myself those shots were a backfire, when I knew I'd ought to report 'em."

She returned the searching look he had recently given her. "He could hurt you," she said, "if you went against him."

"No," Scott denied quickly. "You sit tight here and don't tell anybody, not even Aunt Jennie about that business last night. I'll scoot into town and size things up. There's a good chance Beaumont can be hooked up with the shooting without involving you."

Aunt Jennie's step on the flagstone outside the doorway stopped Linda's protest.

Releasing Linda's hand Scott turned to his aunt. "Going to Cerritos," he said. "Linda's decided to stay on here a bit. Maybe you can make her useful, and I'll clean things up for her in town."

"Goodness knows I could do with a little help," Aunt Jennie replied, giving Linda a warm smile. "Run along, Harry, and give those fellers whatever, for not lookin' after her better."

LINDA followed him to the door. Catching his sleeve she halted him on the step. "I've dragged you into this," she said softly, "and it's bad. . . . there was something between you and Beaumont before, and it scares me."

"Listen, Linda, and get it straight. I'm only going to do something that is strictly up to me. Now forget it and have fun with Aunt Jennie." Giving the hand holding his sleeve a quick encouraging clasp, he broke away and hurried toward the car. Howard and his visitor had gone up to the pasture; he had no time to explain the sudden trip into Cerritos to him.

A warning hunch urged Scott on his way. Tom Jackson's body should have been discovered by now. Since Linda hadn't gone to the authorities after her escape, they might think she was too frightened to tell what she knew. If they hadn't said anything to involve her, Scott had a chance to nail Beaumont for the shooting, and keep her in the clear.

He drove fast, not slowing until he passed the straggling houses at the edge of town. One glance along Main Street assured him that Cerritos was teeming with excitement. Groups along the sidewalks were exclaiming and gesticulating, and there was a crowd around the sheriff's office entrance. He parked as near as he could. Springing from the car he hailed the first man he met.

"Hey, what's up?" he asked.

"Tom Jackson was murdered last night," the man replied. "A rancher comin' in early from north of town saw his car off the side of the road by Skull Creek, with his body lyin' half out of the driver's seat. He was shot plumb through the heart."

"By the creek?" Scott repeated, frowning.

"Ye-ah, coupla miles outa town, where they'd parked, like enough," the man said. "Musta quarreled and she give it to 'im."

"*She?*" Scott forced himself to betray only a natural surprise.

"Yep. The masked dancer from the Corral, they say."

Scott shook his head as if very much taken aback, then broke away to hurry after Porter Yates as he came from the sheriff's office.

"What's the lowdown on this shooting?" he asked as he caught up with the reporter.

"Kind of a jolt, eh?" Yates replied, a mocking twinkle in his sharp eyes. "I could see she got you, when she was dancing last night. Well, it seems *La Señorita* went for a drive with Tom. The watchman at the new telephone building saw 'em pass. That's the last was seen of him, alive, and of her a-tall."

"What time was that?"

"Long after you pulled out," Yates said. "Near midnight. You were probably home pounding your ear and dreaming about the masked siren." He laughed ironically. "Tom wasn't much good, but being the Mayor's son, this is sure going to be big-time stuff."

"Is that all they've got on her?" Scott persisted.

"The Corral outfit said she did go out with Tom," Yates said hastily. "Now I've got to beat it. They're holding the press for me to break it in this issue."

There was still a chance, Scott thought, swinging on a heel and heading back for Sheriff Towner's office. But he'd have to be damn careful how he played it.

The sheriff was at his desk. A deputy was close by, and several other men were grouped around.

"Hi, Towner," Scott said. "Believe I've got a useful piece of evidence for you."

"Yes?" The sheriff had a heavy, barking voice. "Spill it."

SCOTT described hearing the two shots as he stood beside his car not far from windows opening into the private rooms at the Corral.

Towner called him for not reporting the gunfire at the time, then demanded, "*Two* shots, did you say? There was only one in his body."

"There were two, close together," Scott declared. "Why don't you search those rooms for a bullet that'll maybe match the one Doc Green'll dig out of Tom's chest?"

The officer frowned at the advice so freely offered. "What'll that prove?" he barked.

"That Tom was shot at the Corral, not in his car out beside Skull Creek."

"The watchman said the girl was drivin', when he saw 'em," the deputy spoke up. "He seen the mask across her face and she had a scarf thing over her head."

"Humph!" Towner grunted, scowling. "She couldn't of got him out into the car by herself," he growled.

"And if the girl shot him," Scott put in emphatically, "why should she let people see her driving the body away. She was just framing herself."

He spoke with assurance. He knew that as a last resort he could prove Linda Sheridan was twenty miles from Cerritos at the time the building watchman stated he had seen her driving Jackson's car.

A stocky man advanced from the group. "It was me seen her," he said. "The flare we've got in front of the construction work showed up the inside of the car as it passed. Tom Jackson was settin beside her, kind of leanin' forward like he was talkin' to her. His hat was off and that blond hair of his showed up plain."

Towner jerked his head around to face the deputy. "Steve, go over to the Corral. Take a coupla men with you, and search them private rooms. If there's any fuss, you know what to do."

When the officer had gone, Scott said, "Welby's a little guy. If he put on a mask and covered his head with a scarf, he could be taken for a woman at a quick glance."

"Who do you think you are?" the sheriff rasped. "The County Attorney or Ellery Queen?"

"I voted for you, Towner," Scott said, eyeing the officer steadily. "And Frank Howard gave you some strong backing. Nobody from Willow Springs is going to interfere with you. We know you're keen. That's why I came straight here to offer you anything I knew, do what I could to help you clear the way."

"Okay," Towner growled. "Stick around, in case I have need of another deputy."

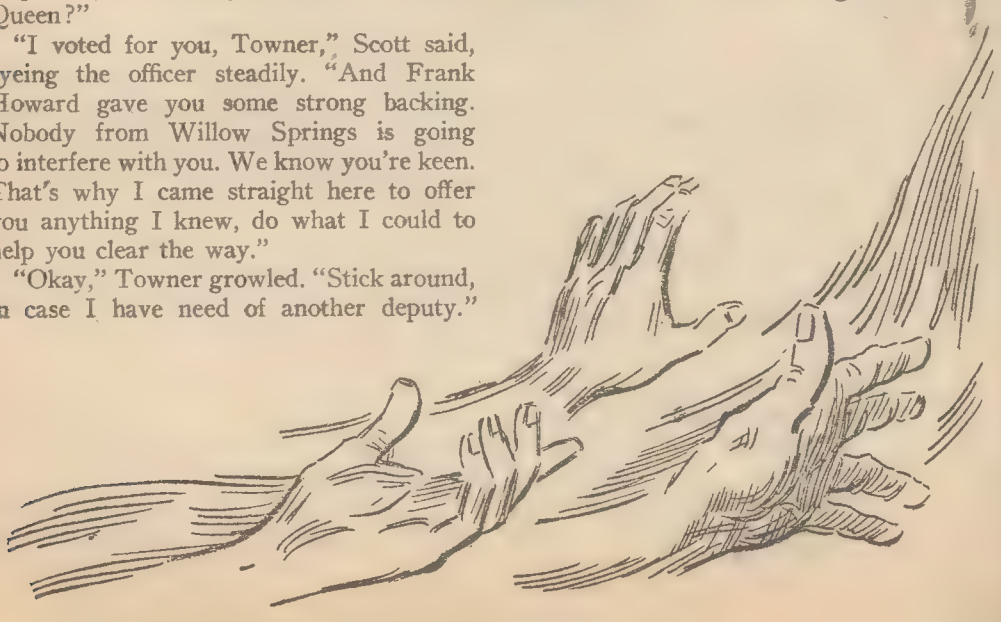
Scott sensed the game, now, play by play. Neither Welby nor Beaumont might have actually wanted the masked driver of the car to be seen and identified as Linda, that masquerade had merely been an extra precaution in getting rid of Jackson's body. They probably figured she'd be so panicked, if charged with the crime, that they could keep in the clear.

"I'll be around," Scott said, going to the door and out on the sidewalk, deep in thought.

FIVE minutes of listening to comments of passersby and loiterers proved that so far as Cerritos was concerned, *la Señorita Mascara* was already tried and convicted of the shooting. But there was some gratification in certain remarks which revealed there was a goodly sprinkling of men that thought he might not have gotten much more than he deserved.

"The old man's okay," one said, "and being Mayor Jackson's son is all that's kept Tom from getting into a lot of messes. That boy was a sneak, can't tell me nothin' else."

Apparently the search pursued by the deputy stirred up no trouble. Towner's telephone was silent and no indications of fresh excitement came from the direction of the roadhouse over at the far edge of Cerritos.



A half hour elapsed before Beaumont's tall figure could be seen striding in the direction of the sheriff's office, nothing gone from his friendly, nonchalant manner. He went through Towner's doorway without noticing Scott at the farther edge of the group outside.

Scott edged into the sheriff's office in time to hear Beaumont saying with proper gravity. "Welby and I are a good bit shocked, still can hardly believe this business has happened. But I've come straight to you to admit that the shooting might, just possibly, have happened at the Corral. Tom was waiting to talk to the girl when she came in from her first number. I don't know what happened, since I had gone into the dancehall." He spoke in a controlled, plausible manner. "When she didn't show for the second dance, Mrs. Welby went to call her. She wouldn't open her dressing room door, just said she didn't feel well and was going home soon. Mrs. Welby told her that was all right. I thought Tom had pulled out before that. Now—" Beaumont paused impressively. "That kid was as strong as they come. She could have dropped Tom out of the window and got him into his car. It was parked close, at the rear of the lot where it was in deep shadow. I hate to think so. She really was a good sort, but—" he didn't finish the sentence, but left its implications obvious.

Scott knew that the accusations had an effect on those men

Scott came forward with a leap to face Beaumont. "You killer!" Fury shook him until he could hardly get the words out. But they came like bullets.

"Hold it!" Towner barked, gripping Scott's arm and yanking him back.

"His name isn't Dick Beaumont," Scott shouted. "He went to the Wyoming Pen as 'Brick', one of the Butch Kessler gang. Phone the warden and get his description, if you don't believe me. Do you suppose his word is any good? *You* know, every cowman and officer in the west still talks about that gang, and Brick was the worst of 'em."

Beaumont's eyes gleamed like hot coals from his livid face. "Kessler's blackheaded kid!" he yelled. "That's who *this* guy is! Call the warden about *him*. Call the sheriff of Cedarbreak County and tell him you've got the Kid! He got away, but he was in it over his head. You haven't got anything on me. I served my time, and I've run straight since. You can't prove a thing on Welby, nor me. To hell with you!" he glared at Scott. "Trying to cut the ground from my feet." He whirled to the sheriff. "The Kid was always a sneak. But he's finished now."

SCOTT sensed that the fusilade of accusations had some effect on the listening men. They were looking at him with narrowed eyes, weighing what Beaumont said.

"Is that true?" Towner barked. "Were you the boy Butch Kessler had with his bunch?"

"Yes," Scott replied. "I got away and made it down here to the Willow Springs Ranch, where most of you have known me for eight years. Put me under arrest, if you think that's the thing to do. I'll face whatever charges there are. But you can't take the girl. She didn't kill Tom Jackson. And she wasn't in Cerritos when his car, with his dead body braced in the seat, was driven past the telephone building."

"How do you know?" Towner demanded, the muscles bulging along his jaw.

"Because she was on the ranch, where she is now!"

"No, I'm not!" a voice declared from the doorway.

Thrusting a way between the men crowding there, Linda entered.

Hair wind-tossed, dressed in the checkered shirt and faded levis, she still reflected a glow and personality that dominated the room.

"Beaumont did the shooting," she went on, her speech racing but every syllable clear. "I was in the hall outside the first card room. I saw Tom Jackson fall. He was trying to make a deal to cut in on Beaumont's winning, if Tom kept still about the cheating. They took my clothes away and locked me in. I wrapped in a blanket and jumped out of the window. I was scared clear out of my wits, Sheriff."

Linda halted, her face chalk white, underlip caught between her teeth.

"She's lying," Beaumont sneered defiantly. "Framing me with Kessler's Kid!"

"Lemme through!" the deputy's voice broke in.

As the crowd parted, he appeared holding a brightly colored bundle in one hand, a spent bullet in the other.

"Found the bullet in the wall of the first card room," he declared. "I called Doc and it's the same caliber as the one he got from the body. And these clothes of the girl's, a dance dress and one for the street, was hid in the springs of the couch in that same room."

"I'll put you all under arrest till we straighten this out," Towner said grimly.

Scott had moved close to Linda. "Why did you come in?" he asked. "I was telling all that was necessary."

"And got yourself in over your head," she retorted, color rushing back into her cheeks. "That's why I was sure you were jumping into a mess for yourself. I told the Howards, and Mr. Howard drove me in."

"I refuse to say anything more until I have an attorney to consult with," Beaumont said emphatically. "If you are going to take the word of a wanted outlaw—"

"Cut out the names!" Howard's deep voice boomed from the doorway. "Nobody in this room's wanted for anything, except yourself." He strode in to face the sheriff, one hand extending a folded paper. "Read that," Howard said. "It's from the sheriff

of Cedarbreak County, in response to an inquiry I made eight years ago."

AS TOWNER opened the folded letter, the rancher turned to Scott. "When you landed at Willow Springs," he said, "I knowed you was running from something pretty scarey. But you didn't have the look of a youngster that's done anything real bad. I'd been readin' the papers and follerin' the Butch Kessler stuff and I figgered mighty quick who you was.

"I didn't believe they had anything much against you, so I wrote that county officer. He give you a clean bill, Harry. Said they wasn't holding any charge ag'in you, would have liked to get hold of you for a witness, that was all. The trial was over and he said to let everything ride. I did. Never told you nothing because I figgered you was going to get along a lot better if you had an idee you'd cut that life out complete, and there wasn't nobody around that knew about it. Didn't even tell Jennie, and I guess it's the only time I held a secret from her."

Towner had finished reading. He folded the letter and handed it back to Howard.

"That settles it, so far as Scott is concerned in the old stuff," he said. "I'm not arresting him, but I want him and the girl to do some plain talking, soon's I get Beaumont into a cell and the room clear."

"You can't do that, on any evidence you've got," Beaumont spluttered.

"Can if I say so!" Towner barked back at him. "I remember that case. You got out of a charge of double murder by the skin of your teeth. If I'd had the least idea who you was you wouldn't of run any roadhouse in this county. Take him in, Steve. Then we'll pick up Welby and his missus—make a clean sweep."

"And Linda, here, was on the ranch before eleven o'clock last night," Howard said. "The car lights waked me when Harry drove in."

"I'm satisfied on that," Towner said, his growl mild. "But he'd ought to of told me about Beaumont 'fore this. Betcha this'll teach him not to try to fool officers of the law." He tried to glower at Scott but there was a twinkle showing in his eyes. "Go over to the hotel and eat dinner," he advised, "then come back here."

"I parked the truck in a bad place," Howard said as they left the sheriff's office. "Be with you after I move it."

Linda went with Scott toward the hotel.

"You'll have to stay at the ranch now," he said, "Towner won't let you leave the county till the case is closed."

"It'll take more than that growling old bear to make me stay any place I—don't want to," she said.

"And you don't want to stay at Willow Springs?" Scott asked.

"But I do," she said promptly. "I couldn't bear to leave—Mrs. Howard." Her giggle was a little shaky but it indicated enough spirit to meet Harry Scott's unqualified approval.

"Only Aunt Jennie?" he entreated, halting her as they reached the steps.

"We-ell, there might be others," she said softly. "Mr. Howard and a young guy that works for him."

Scott had both hands now.

"Me?" he exclaimed. "Oh, Linda, you've got to put a seal on that."

Bending his head he gave her a quick hard kiss.

"Right on Main Street!" she gasped.

"Sure," he said jubilantly, "So I have plenty of witnesses."

KNOW YOUR WEST

Answers to the questions on page 36

1. No.
2. A light, flexible whip made on or attached to the ends of bridle reins.
3. Arizona.
4. Pack saddles.
5. Platte River (its North Fork at Casper).
6. In cowboy talk "to locate a bunch of cattle" means to herd them on new range until they get used to it enough to feel at home and probably stay there.
7. Withers.
8. Bulldogging, also called steer-wrestling.
9. For rodeo trick riding.
10. Texas, with about 18,000 miles.

WHEN AN hombre comes face to face with his final hot lead showdown, there are only three things left for him to do. He can run . . . or fight . . . or die

THE DEVIL IS A

By CLARK GRAY

JOHN BLAIR'S rig consisted of a derrick, a steam engine, a motley assortment of belts, sheaves, cables, bits, stems, jars, bailers and a string of fishing tools. Blair drilled oil wells for a living. It was a good business.

Blair had sandy hair and a spatter of freckles. His shoulders were meaty from a youth spent swinging a sixteen-pound tool dresser's sledge. He wore a .45 on his hip when he got off his horse in front of the Boomer hotel, where Sid Newcomber had his office.

A couple of toughs lounged outside the hotel in the late afternoon shade of the tin awning, Stetsons tilted over their eyes, scarred high-heeled boots propped on the hitchrail.

Blair passed the toughs without a glance.

Inside Newcomber's office, Blair closed the door behind him. Sid Newcomber looked up with a frown from his battered desk. The frown changed to fear as Newcomber recognized Blair. Newcomber pushed to his feet, opening his mouth to shout.

Blair said, "Sit down, Sid. You won't need your boys. Sit down, and shut up."

Sid Newcomber wet his lips and eased carefully back into his swivel chair. "Hello, John. I heard you were drilling in Oklahoma, but I didn't know you were close to Jay."

"Naturally," Blair grinned thinly, "or you'd never have come here, would you, Sid?"

"I wouldn't say that." Newcomber pushed forward a box of cigars. Newcomber was a consumptive—white-faced, toothpick thin, one of the delicate appearing kind who strangely outlast the brawny men by thirty years. "I've no reason to be afraid of you, John."

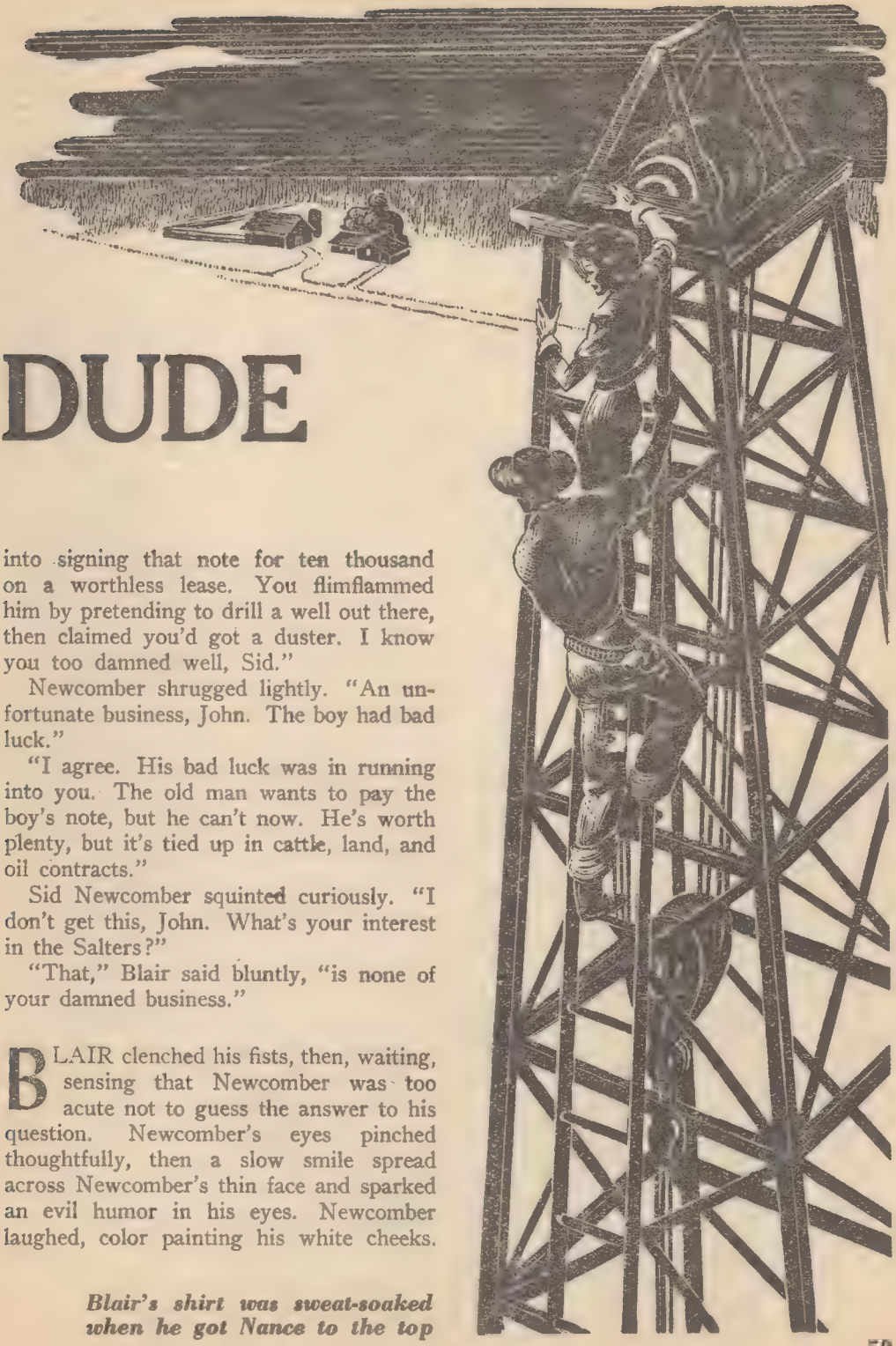
Blair considered this and decided it was true. But he didn't want Newcomber to know it was true. He said curtly, "I've come about the Salter note."

Newcomber said, "Oh?" and folded his thin hands on the desk. "I heard there was drilling on the Salter place. You got a rig out there?"

"Uh-huh. Sid, you flimflammed young Phil, didn't you?"

"You expect me to admit that? Don't be a fool, John."

"All right—but I know you did. The boy saw his old man making money hand over fist in oil. The old man always kept a hobble on the boy, but the kid wanted some money of his own. You talked him



DUDE

into signing that note for ten thousand on a worthless lease. You flimflammed him by pretending to drill a well out there, then claimed you'd got a duster. I know you too damned well, Sid."

Newcomber shrugged lightly. "An unfortunate business, John. The boy had bad luck."

"I agree. His bad luck was in running into you. The old man wants to pay the boy's note, but he can't now. He's worth plenty, but it's tied up in cattle, land, and oil contracts."

Sid Newcomber squinted curiously. "I don't get this, John. What's your interest in the Salters?"

"That," Blair said bluntly, "is none of your damned business."

BLAIR clenched his fists, then, waiting, sensing that Newcomber was too acute not to guess the answer to his question. Newcomber's eyes pinched thoughtfully, then a slow smile spread across Newcomber's thin face and sparked an evil humor in his eyes. Newcomber laughed, color painting his white cheeks.

Blair's shirt was sweat-soaked when he got Nance to the top

"The girl!" Newcomber choked. "Honest John Blair, sweet on a millionaire cowman's daughter! Congratulations, John! You're coming up in the world."

Blair held his temper, and said, "Be careful, Sid. I may not be able to keep from hitting you."

Newcomber sobered instantly. "All right, John. But hell, you can't be serious about the note. The boy signed it. I used my own money to drill that well, and you can't prove we didn't make an honest try for oil. I've got a little profit coming—I'll admit that. But I'm out some expense, too. I'll have to collect."

Blair gave an instant's study to the man. Newcomber could be poker-faced when he wanted; he was poker-faced now. That fact told Blair that Newcomber knew more than he admitted. Blair sighed.

"No use trying to fool you, Sid. All right, it's true. The old man is a stubborn cuss, and he don't like oil—wouldn't be in the business at all if they hadn't found it on his place. Nance told me he insists on paying off that note in his own oil royalties, if you'll take 'em. We've got two producers out there now. And we're moving up the anticline all the time. The old man don't know how valuable those royalties are, Sid. But you do. Only you ain't going to make a double profit on this deal. I'll ask you nice once more, Sid. Will you hold off till the old man can raise cash?"

"Blair, you can go to the devil."

Newcomber was moving, pawing in his desk. Blair stepped forward swiftly, knocking the tiny derringer from Newcomber's fist with the barrel of his .45. Newcomber opened his mouth to shout, then closed it as Blair eared the gun hammer. The rasp of metal sounded harshly loud in the sudden silence of the office.

Blair said quietly, "Hand the note over, Sid—or I'll kill you, here and now."

NEWCOMBER'S thin lips went blue with fear; he started to speak, and then pointed wordlessly toward the squat green safe standing against the wall.

Blair motioned toward the safe with the .45. "Open it. Get a move on, Sid. If anybody comes in while you're at it, I'll shoot."

Newcomber came hastily out of his chair, stumbling in his hurry to reach the safe. His hand trembled at the dial, and when he finally swung the door open and handed Blair the paper, Newcomber's fingers shook nervously.

Blair flicked the paper open with his left hand. He backed into a corner, keeping the .45 trained on Newcomber. He took a quick glance at the paper. It was the note, all right. A promissory note in the amount of ten thousand dollars, signed by Phillip Salter. The result of youth and ambition and the trickery of Sid Newcomber.

Blair said, "Sid, just forget this ever happened. Forget the note. You never had it. Understand?"

Newcomber nodded wordlessly, eyes on the gun. Finally he blurted, "I can't savvy you, John. You know what this will lead to. To pull a crazy stunt like this—"

"It won't happen, Sid—not what you're thinking. I'm going to give this note to old man Salter. He'll likely tear it up. You keep your bad boys away from the Salters, Sid. Or I'll come back and finish this. I want to be sure you understand that. One move out of your toughs will land you belly up in boothill. I'm warning you, Sid."

Blair left the Boomer and slipped quietly out of town, with the note secure in his shirt pocket. At the edge of town he spurred into a gallop down the white ribbon of road that was etched by the blue dusk of early evening between the blackjacks. Ten minutes later he halted, tied his horse to a tree well back from the road, and squatted in a ticket of buckbrush, chewing an unlit cigarette and waiting.

THERE was, Blair knew, the possibility that Newcomber would put men immediately on his trail, but Newcomber was clever enough to use violence only as a last resort. Upon reflection, Newcomber would realize that he had no chance of recovering the note intact. Newcomber's best bet would be to sue for collection through the courts, even without the note. Or, if Newcomber knew anything about old man Salter, he might even appeal to

the old man's honesty, ask him to sign another note.

The old man, unfortunately, was proud of the fact that he paid his debts. Nance had told Blair about her father's stubborn pride. And it was because of this pride—because the old man had refused to listen to Nance's arguments—that Blair had taken tonight's action.

Blair hunkered in the semi-darkness and wondered about that now, wondered why he had risked his hide to save old man Salter's valuable oil properties. But the note had worried Nance—and Blair would have cut off his right leg for Nance.

Three months ago, Blair had spudded in his first well on the Salter cattle holdings, and it was Nance who'd invited him to headquarters for dinner.

It was Nance who'd shown him over the ranch, pointing out the beef-making characteristics of the new Hereford breed of cattle. It was Nance with whom he'd fallen hard in love—and it was Nance who loved him.

But Blair was honest with himself now. More than love for Nance had thrust him into tonight's violence. There was also a profound contempt for men like Newcomber, who were giving the oil business a reputation for trickery. Blair had known Newcomber ten years before. Even then, Newcomber had been trimming suckers by the ancient device of pretending to drill a well while actually making only a show of it and pocketing the rest of the money.

Blair himself had once drilled a well for Newcomber—or a short piece of a well. When Blair had learned the truth, he'd talked. Newcomber had spent a year in prison for that. Blair shifted his position, wondered if he could catch Newcomber in some illegal act, and decided Newcomber would have learned by now to cover his tracks.

Full darkness had descended when Blair, having seen no trace of pursuit, left his hiding place. Half an hour later he rode onto Salter land and saw in the flare-lit clearing the bottom half of his own derrick, a black framework of sway braces and girts rising into the black night. Blair's night driller, Murdock, reported a depth penetration of ten feet since sunset. Blair nodded, warned Murdock to keep a close lookout for oil sand, and entered his tent beside the rig.

After shaving and putting on a clean shirt, Blair lounged outside the tent and stood for an idle moment in the flickering gas flarelight talking to Murdock, his glance on the Salter headquarters house which stood half a mile uphill from the rig. Lights in the big house were blazing. Blair remembered, then, that he had not had supper. He grinned, touched the promissory note in his shirt pocket, and mounting his horse, rode the short distance to the Salter hitchrail. In answer to his knock, Nance came to the door to greet him.

NANCE SALTER was a cowgirl, raised in the saddle. She had a stub nose, wise grey eyes, and an indefinable gentleness about her that did things to Blair no other girl had ever done.

Nance smiled now and stood aside from the door. Nance said, "Just in time to eat, John. I noticed you weren't at the rig. How are things in town?"

"So-so." Blair grinned, stepped inside, kissed her on the lips. He said, "Ah-h-h," in satisfaction.

Nance tilted her head against his shoulder, face close to his, and there was her special gentleness in her eyes. Blair thought, at this moment, that whatever trouble he had with Sid Newcomber would be worth it. Blair rubbed his knuckles against her short black hair, then released her. Nance, smiling, led the way to the dining room.

The old man and young Phil were just sitting down at table. The old man, at sixty, had something of a belly, but his hips and legs were a cowman's. He had married late in life, after he had his land and cattle paid for. This family was a strangely united one, perhaps because of a bitterness in the old man, and a sympathy for him in his children. Like many of his kind, the old man resented the passing of the free-grass, high rolling days, when a fortune could be built on a shoestring—and raw guts.

Nance's father placed his brawny forearms flat beside his plate, and peered at Blair.

"Evening, Blair. Set down and try some cow country vittles. Son-of-a-gun stew, made from a grass-fat heifer calf. You never ate nothing like it."

Blair detected the faint note of acerbity in the old man's tones. He was aware that the man did not like him much, but that he tried to hide this out of regard for his daughter. The old man, Blair suspected, could not like anyone who was raised in the East, who didn't know a cinch ring from a snaffle, as Blair hadn't until just recently.

Blair nodded gravely and took the chair beside Nance.

The stew was delicious. While Nance was bringing in the apple pie, Blair spooned yellow cream into his coffee and made the plunge.

He said, "I ran into Sid Newcomber in town this evening."

A fork clattered to the floor. Blair glanced up to see young Phil go white. Phil was scarcely eighteen—spoiled, but made of the right stuff underneath, Blair judged. Blair looked at the old man, saw twin anger spots glow on the old man's cheekbones. Blair went on hurriedly, getting it over with.

"Look. Nance told me about the note. I've known Newcomber for years. I went to see him—just trying to help. You aren't obligated to pay that kind of debt, Mr. Salter. Because Newcomber cheated young Phil."

The old man glared, then swung his heavy gaze to Nance, entering from the kitchen.

"Nance," the old man bellowed, "I thought we agreed to keep this in the family."

"John is almost in the family, Father." Nance said it calmly, but there was reproach in her glance at Blair. "Besides, maybe he *can* help."

"I don't need help from a dude oil-wrangler. And I pay my honest debts. Blair, damn it, you have to keep out of my affairs."

BLAIR sipped his coffee. He set the cup carefully in the saucer, framing his words. When he spoke, he kept his voice reasonable, knowing any emotion on his part would only anger the old man.

"All right, Mr. Salter. Pay if you have to. But Nance told me you were going to offer your oil royalties. Don't do that, Mr. Salter. This well we're drilling now may end up more valuable than your whole ranch. You could sell some of your cattle and—"

"Sell my cattle, hell! Blair, cattle made this country—not that damned stinking oil. Besides, who the devil are you to tell me what to do?"

Blair grinned tightly, feeling a liking for the old man, and took the note from his shirt pocket and tossed it on the table.

"I took that from Newcomber. Tear it up, Mr. Salter. Forget the whole thing."

Salter surprised Blair, then. Quite calmly, the old man picked up the note and read it. Salter glanced at Phil, pale-faced in his chair. Salter shot a quick look at Nance, who had come now to stand beside Blair. Then Salter folded the note carefully and laid it beside his plate.

Salter said very quietly, "You took it from Newcomber? How? At gunpoint?"

Blair nodded.

Salter grunted, fisted his hand beside his plate. "Blair, you've made me look like a fool. You've done an act of violence in my name, without my permission. You have stuck your damned Yankee nose in my business once too often. Get out of my house, Blair. And when you've finished your well, get off my land."

Stunned, Blair could only get to his feet and stare. He felt his hands clenching and unclenching at his sides. He could see Salter's viewpoint, and perhaps the old man was partly right—but he did not know the value of his oil properties. There was this aspect of it, and then there was Nance.

Blair said, "Mr. Salter, Newcomber is crooked as a pig's tail. I've got a right to help you. I'm going to marry Nance, and—"

"You'll marry Nance," the old man roared, "when I'm in hell, Blair, and not

before. My girl ain't marrying a common thief. Come on. Move." The old man shoved erect, his huge hands making the table creak under him.

Grim-faced, Blair stood his ground an instant, returning the old man's stare. Then the realization came to him that he had failed. And failing, Blair saw quite clearly that he had made an implacable enemy. Blair sighed, turned to Nance. "Nance, I'm sorry this couldn't be the way you wanted it. Will you come to town and marry me tonight?"

Nance's eyes closed. She stood rigid beside him, and Blair could read her mind as clearly as if the words were printed for

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The Mountain Lion

By PHIL SQUIRES

When ol' Thomas Cougar goes courtin',
by heck,
Though just how he does it I know
not,
He wrops his long tail plumb around
his own neck
And ties the damn thing in a bow
knot!

---

him. Nance was thinking of the tight little unity of her family, held together by this blustering old cowman. Nance was remembering that she was all her father had. She and Phil and a million dollars in cattle and land. Finally Nance sighed and opened her eyes, and Blair could see the pain shine in them.

"John—John, let's not decide this tonight. I'll ride down to the rig tomorrow."

Blair could do nothing more. He nodded curtly, loving Nance with a deep hurt inside him.

Blair left the room blindly without a glance at the old man.

THE bitterness of Blair's failure was an ache inside him. He felt a sudden loneliness that was a premonition of the lonely years to come. But as he left the house in the cool evening air, caution returned. He took a turn around the house, inspecting the shrubbery and the thick-trunked cottonwoods before he mounted his horse and rode the half mile into the flarelit clearing in which the rig stood.

Murdock, the driller, had run into trouble. The sand line had parted, dropping the bailer into the bottom of the hole, one thousand feet underground. But Murdock was a capable man, who knew his complicated job. Already he had rigged a spang grab to the casing line and fished out the bailer, using the calf wheel for power. All that remained was to re-thread the sand line through its sheave in the crown block at the top of the derrick.

This was a two-man job, and Blair welcomed the activity. He stuck a couple of small wrenches in his pocket, then said as an afterthought to Murdock, "I struck up a little ruckus in town this evening. Anybody comes looking for me, steer 'em off."

Murdock, a wizened, bald-headed little man, had been around. Murdock grinned. "I got a double-barreled 12-gauge in the belt house, John. Keep it for rabbits."

Blair let a fleeting smile touch him. "Maybe you can use it on a coyote." Then he swung onto the ladder. The ladder ascended straight up the side of the derrick. Eighty feet into utter blackness. Blair felt the first wave of vertigo pass over him at twenty feet, then it left him. This was a thing he had conquered long ago, this instinctive fear of height that some men have. He no longer gave it any thought. He climbed on until he reached the top, then paused. Beneath him, Murdock's figure in the flarelight looked squat and dumpy. Murdock was clamping the free end of the sand line around the casing line, preparatory to lifting it aloft.

Murdock finished clamping the line and busied himself at the telegraph wheel. The calf wheel began to turn sluggishly, and the sand line rose from the ground and spiraled upward.

Blair hooked one leg around the ladder, swung his body out over the empty space in the center of the derrick, and went to work. He unclamped the sand line, reclamped it to a girt some distance from the line's severed end, so that he would not have to support its weight while threading it through the sheave. The threading done, he clamped the free end to the downward side of the casing line and opened his mouth to signal Murdock. The sound froze in his throat.

THREE men were in the clearing beneath him. One of them, Murdock, had his hands in the air. The second man had a rifle trained on Murdock's belly. The third was snooping around Blair's tent, sixgun in his fist.

Nausea erupted in Blair's stomach, making him clutch the ladder giddily. Quite clearly he saw what this meant.

It meant that Newcomber's toughs were out to kill him. It meant that Blair's warning—to kill Newcomber if he molested the Salters—had forced Newcomber to dispose of Blair first. Blair bit down hard on his lip, slowly slipped the wrenches back into his pocket. He still had his .45. He drew it, then leaned against the ladder to wait.

The engine had been turning over idly, but now, evidently on orders from one of the gunmen, Murdock stepped forward and killed it. Blair could hear Murdock speak.

"I tell you I ain't seen him since before sunset. He went to town, I reckon."

The man with the rifle shook his head. "His horse is here. Did he go to Salter's?"

"Could have." Murdock shrugged. "I just wouldn't know, mister."

The man with the rifle cursed, then jerked his head at his companion. "Let's go. I reckon we'll find him up to Salter's."

Blair waited, as the two stalked out of the clearing. Fifty yards downtrail a third man called out. Blair thought, *Newcomber—come to see the job done.*

Blair heard the faint murmur of three voices conferring, then the sound of horses galloping toward Salter's. Blair descended quickly from the derrick, knowing now that he hadn't much time to do whatever he was going to do. By the time he'd touched the ground, the hoofbeats had halted, which meant that the three were already asking about him at the Salter headquarters.

Murdock faced him with a sardonic grin, and the 12-gauge shotgun clamped in scrawny fists. "What do we do now, John? Fight, or run? These gents ain't the law, are they?"

Blair shook his head. He moved to his tent, fumbled in the darkness till he found the cartridge box, stuffed his pockets with the shining shells. He was returning to Murdock when he heard the sound of hoofbeats once again, a single horse this time.

Blair said harshly, "Get in the engine house, Murdock. If we have to, we fight."

Blair watched Murdock disappear through the wooden door of the engine house, and then he himself slipped into the buckbrush at the edge of the clearing. The horseman was almost on him now, and an instant later Nance Salter slid to a halt on the bare ground around the derrick. Nance's grey eyes were wide with panic.

"John! John! Newcomber's at the house with two gunmen. I think they want to kill you."

"I know. Nance, answer me. Did Newcomber mention the note?" Blair said.

Nance shook her head, and her wide eyes searched his face. "No. He was very polite. Just said he wanted to see you on business. But I knew, John. I knew."

BLAIR stifled a curse. If the note had been mentioned, he thought, the old man would have returned it, and that would have halted Newcomber. Then suddenly Blair knew he didn't want Newcomber halted. He wanted to finish this.

He said curtly, "Up the derrick, Nance."

Nance stared wildly, then seemed to understand. She ran to the derrick, put a foot on the ladder, then stopped, trembling.

"I—I can't, John. I'm scared."

Blair had done it before, talked away the fear of height. It was not uncommon in a business where much of the working time is spent sixty to one hundred feet in the air. He prayed that none of them

would think of the derrick as a possible hiding place. But these were not oil men; it was not their habit to seek victims in the sky. Blair's shirt was sweat-soaked when he had Nance at the crown block.

He left her. He descended forty feet, then sixty, and still he had not been sighted.

Then Newcomber was saying, "Come out, Blair," and this time Blair located him. Newcomber was farthest south, in a little thicket of scrub oak.

A shot blossomed orange from Newcomber's scrub oak. Blair heard the bullet thud into the walls of the engine house, and this was what he'd been waiting for. He squinted along the barrel of his .45, aiming just above that gunflash, and fired.

Guns whanged now, and bullets kicked dust in his face. The thundering reverberations of Murdock's 12-gauge splintered the night as Blair gained the shelter of the buckbrush. An agonized scream pierced his ears, then came the sound of a horse, a single horse, pounding downtrail.

Blair waited two minutes, not daring to move. No sound came from the brush. But from Salter headquarters he heard the old man shout something, heard young Phil answer, and Blair knew these two would be here as soon as they could saddle.

He found the gunman who had held the rifle. He would never hold another rifle. Murdock's 12-gauge had turned him into an unrecognizable mess. Then Blair found Newcomber. Blair's one shot with his .45 had entered Newcomber's shoulder, angled downward through his chest. Newcomber, too, was dead.

Blair straightened, and he saw Murdock coming toward him. Murdock had a bullet nick on the side of his neck, and his eyes were bright with excitement. Behind Murdock, old man Salter and young Phil were approaching with worried faces.

Salter bellowed, "Where's Nance? Is she all right? Where is she, man?"

Blair grinned, then. "She's safe and unhurt, Mr. Salter. I'll get her in a minute. But first I want you to take a look around. You can read sign. Look around and see what's happened here."

"Three men jumped you. One got away. Other two shot first—for the plain reason that they couldn't shoot afterwards, being dead. All right, Blair. What does it mean?" the old man said.

"It means this," Blair said. "Newcomber cheated Phil, like I said. If he hadn't, he'd have sued through the courts to collect on that note, even if the note was gone. But Newcomber had to play it this way. He couldn't sue, because he couldn't stand a public investigation of that well he pretended to drill. The well was a fake."

Salter said, "Blair, you're a damned peculiar hombre, even for a Yankee. But, by gum, I think you'd make a cowman."

Blair started to grin, and then Nance's voice drifted down, irritable with tension.

"Hey! Somebody invite me down to that tea party. It's lonesome up here."

Blair did grin, then. He swung up the derrick ladder, and as he climbed upward, he was thinking that he would have to put his arms around Nance again to help her down. Only now he could enjoy it.

Coming up in the next issue

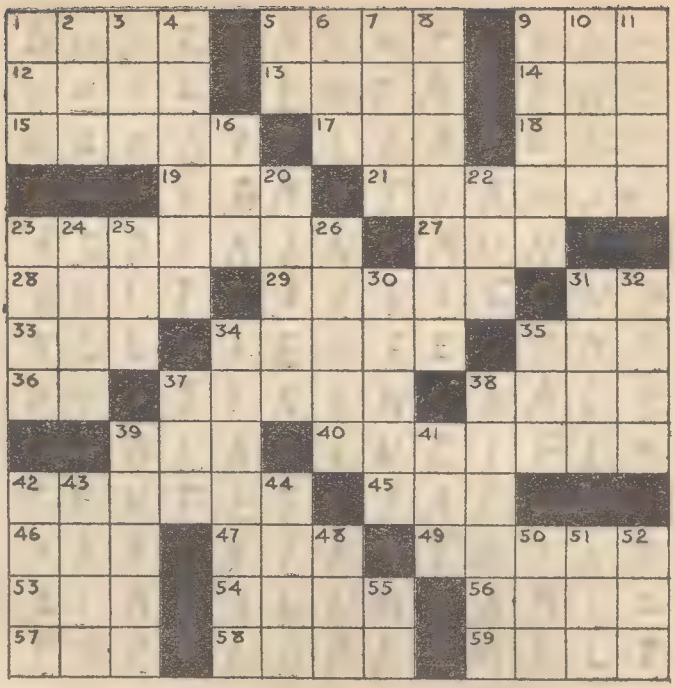
TURN TIME BACK

It Took a Man From the Pen to Deliver Soldier City From the Grip of Its Bullies

A Novelette

By FRANK C. ROBERTSON

THE WESTERNERS' CROSSWORD PUZZLE



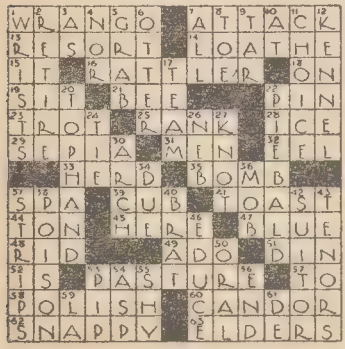
The solution to this puzzle will appear in the next issue

ACROSS

1. Tenderfoot
5. To play noisily
9. Smoked pork
12. Wicked
13. Wide-mouthed pitcher
14. To be in debt
15. Cowboy
17. Meadow
18. To obtain
19. Organ of hearing
21. Long speech
23. Original Westerner
27. Race
28. To prepare for publication
29. Unbranded calf
31. Not down
33. Born
34. River embankment
35. Native mineral
36. Forward
37. Warning whistle
38. To engage in, as war
39. Infant's apron
40. Friction match
42. Rodeo enclosures
45. Droop
46. Feminine pronoun
47. Tear
49. Heavy cord
53. To ventilate
54. Saltlike substance
56. Operatic solo
57. In favor of
58. Horse's easy gait
59. Thaw

DOWN

1. Moisture on plants
2. Succulent fruit
3. Accomplished
4. First born child
5. Concerning
6. Wise bird
7. To encounter
8. Western treeless land
9. Navajo hut
10. Greatly impressed
11. To apportion
16. Asiatic ox
20. Horseman
22. To regret
23. City in Nevada
24. Paradise
25. Metal stamp
26. Fictitious story
30. Group of plants or animals
31. To force onward
32. To look closely
34. Generous
35. Dull fellow
37. To perch
38. Indian tent
39. Western mountain canary
41. Mouser
42. Fellow
43. One who inherits
44. Fodder tower
48. Young dog
50. Anger
51. Nothing
52. To consume food
55. Myself



Solution to First October Puzzle

Deft fingers and a feminine eye for design turn out saddles for work and play

Sammy Sisco at work

Cowgirl Saddlemaker

By S. Omar Barker

SOME years ago down in Fort Worth, Texas, H. J. Justin & Sons, long time cowboy bootmakers, received in the mail some samples of hand-stamped leather from 'way out in California. It was nice work. "In fact," says Mr. H. N. Fisch, sales manager of the Justin outfit, "it was *mighty* nice work—really artistic. We decided right then that such expert leather stamping was just what he wanted for some of our fancy cowboy boot tops."

The samples had come from "Sammy and Bertha Sisco, Redwood City, Californa." Mr. Fisch bundled up a batch of boot top leathers and addressed them to "Mr. and Mrs. Sammy Sisco." In due time the boots came back, beautifully hand carved in true Western designs, and for several years Justin's did business by mail with "Mr. Sammy Sisco."

Then a couple of years ago Mr. Fisch happened to be in California and called on the Siscos. It was a pleasant visit, but for Mr. Fisch a very red-faced one for the first few minutes. "Mr. Sammy Sisco," he discovered, was an attractive young brown-eyed cowgirl, a slender five feet two inches tall, with boyish-bobbed brown hair and a bubbling-over enthusiasm for everything Western, including the teaching of about a hundred amazing tricks to her own Quarter Horse, Dusty.

Nor was that all. He learned that Sammy Sisco was also a maker of cowboy saddles. Now as far as I've been able to learn, ladies who make saddles are and always have been almost as scarce in the West as cowhands that crochet bedspreads. Which makes this horse-loving cowgirl if not the only, at least one of the very few lady saddlemakers in the world.

In the leather products business with her are Sammy's older sister Bertha and her brother Gene, who taught her how to start from taw and put a saddle together so it will stay put.

Not many saddlemakers fabricate their own trees, which means the rawhide-covered wooden saddle skeleton upon which leather is fashioned, fitted and fastened to make the horseback throne of the cowboy. Sammy buys her trees from well known makers in California, Oregon, Utah and Colorado.

Many old-timers thought they had to have oak or other hardwood for their saddle trees, but Sammy tells me that selected pine is the wood most used today—and plently strong when properly shaped, mortised and bolted together. The metal horn may be of bronze or steel, often nickel-plated, but for range cowboys' stock saddles and rodeo roping saddles it must be "bull strong an' rooted solid" in the tree fork.

The first thing you will notice upon stepping into the workshop where Sammy Sisco is fixin' to make a saddle is the tangy but not unpleasant smell of wet leather. Sammy says a lot of people think you put a saddle together first, then carve whatever design you want on it. But it wouldn't work that way. In order to impress a design upon leather with the leather worker's swivel knife and stamping tools, the leather must be moderately wet and lie flat on a perfectly smooth stamping stone, usually a slab of marble. Thus every one of the dozen and a half pieces that go to make a saddle, not counting saddle strings and rosettes, must be cut out in the right size and shape and given whatever decoration it is to have before you start assembling the saddle.

Designing original patterns on leather, as all of hers are, Sammy Sisco properly considers an art. Putting a saddle together, she thinks, is simply an exacting job for technical hand skill. Well, for my money both these phases of saddlemaking are Chinese puzzles that call for special skills.

SADDLEMAKERS not only must have the right know-how—they've got to practice painstakingly the right do-how in a lot of places that don't show. Failure properly to fit and attach the foundation leather of the seat, called the ground seat, and its strip of thin metal reinforcement can easily result in that cowboy's disgrace, a sore-backed horse. Failure to attach the rigging to the tree with the necessary dozen or more strong screws can easily result in something even worse—a cowboy with a busted neck!

On Dixie Sammy won the best-dressed cowgirl and best stock horse trophies

The Siscos, and Sammy personally, have made a lot of saddles both for ranch hands and for such rodeo top-hands as Leonard Black, Buckshot Sorells, Ike Chism, etc. They are justifiably proud of the fact that no Sisco saddle has ever come apart. The first saddle Sammy ever made, about five years ago, got a good tryout for strength and ruggedness the first time it was ever cinched up.

She had made it for her own use and tried it out on her own favorite horse. Dusty, who just about broke Sammy's heart by dying of colic in 1947, was a pet trick horse. One of the tricks he knew was how to untie a single loop slip-knot. Cowboys will agree with Sammy that most horses don't much like new saddles. Maybe it's the unavoidable squeakiness of unused leather. Maybe they're just used to saddles that already smell horsey.

Anyhow when Sammy cinched up her new saddle and stepped back to admire it, Dusty promptly jerked loose the slip-knot with which she had him hitched, and playfully took out for the yonder side of

wherever he could get to the quickest. Running through a slippery mudhole with his halter rope dragging, Dusty stepped on the rope, jerked his head down and turned a flip flop that landed him plain upside down, smack on top of the brand new saddle. Sammy says that was the fastest used saddle she ever saw—and the muddiest. But the point is that even though Dusty rolled clear over on it in getting up, nothing about the saddle was busted or even loosened.

It is not the purpose of this piece to teach anybody how to make saddles, but maybe a point or two about the Sisco system, which is also standard practice in the shops of all the most reliable saddlemakers, won't give you mental cinch sores.

IN A WAY, saddles carry a double obligation: one to the horse, one to the rider. For the horse's sake Sammy lines the skirts of her saddles with the finest quality sheepskin, wool on. Since this wool is the primary shock-absorber between the rider's weight and the horse's back, it has to be even, thick and of a live, springy texture. Of course horse sweat and chafing would soon ruin this fluffy lining if no saddle blanket were used, but the idea is that a *good* saddle should be well enough made not to hurt a horse's back very readily, even without the blanket. Incidentally, like the majority of Western riders, Sammy favors the Navajo for a saddle blanket, but likes a curled hair pad under it if used single.

For the rider's sake Sammy must see to it that the saddle's rigging, as the cowboys say, is plumb stout. You might say the rigging is the saddle's suspenders. It consists of one pair of broad straps of strong leather on each side of the saddle. One of these straps is screwed, nailed and tacked to the tree at the base of the fork, the other just behind the cantle. If the saddle is single rig (for one cinch only), these straps slant down in something like a V to lap over the cinch ring—to which they are leather or rawhide laced in better quality saddles, riveted in some cheap ones.

If the saddle is double rig (two cinches), each rigging strap supports a cinch ring, though cross-strapped together. The rigging can also be made in unit leather plates cut in sort of a lopsided U shape, instead of two straps. To make it a short stick and soon whittled, it's the rigging that supports the pull of the cinch that holds the saddle on the horse. You could take a naked saddle tree with nothing but rigging, add cinch strap, cinch and latigo, cinch it on a horse, and it would stay there. In fact, that's about all there was to those old-style Army McClellans the Cavalry used to straddle. You might conceivably ride a saddle tree without skirts, fenders, jockeys, fork or cantle covering, or even seat or stirrup leathers, but you sure couldn't ride one without rigging.

So when Sammy Sisco says she believes in putting that rigging on there to stay, you can sure 'nough bet she knows what she's talking about.

To a lot of folks a saddle is a saddle, and what of it? But don't try to tell that to a cowpuncher—or to a cowgirl saddlemaker! Every saddle the Siscos make is plumb tailor-made to the buyer's order, and no two exactly alike, either in leather carved design for "purty," or size, shape and style for utility. Most cowboys know just what

Dusty turned a flip-flop

they want, but if there is anything they're doubtful about, Sammy prides herself on being experienced enough as a rider as well as saddlemaker to help them study it out!

To give some idea of what she needs to know in order to go to work on a saddle, let's slap together some mythical specifications for a mythical cowpoke with the mythical money to pay for it:

Tree: Bob Crosby Roper, bullhide covered. ***Fork:*** 13 inch. ***Cantle:*** 3 inch, dished. ***Horn:*** 2½ inch pelican, leather-covered. ***Rigging:*** ¾ double, D rings. ***Fenders:*** Bell, 8½ by 17½ inches. ***Stirrup Leathers:*** 3 inch, 1 piece, built-in liners. ***Skirts:*** Round style, medium. ***Seat:*** 13½ inches. ***Cinchas:*** 13 strand Mohair, leather safes, buckle rings. ***Stirrups:*** Visalia flat bottom ("so I can kick out of 'em quick"), leather toe piece. ***Rosettes:*** leather—no metal conchas. ***Stamping:*** Hand job, horsey, an' leave it to Sammy Sisco to make it purty!

Such a saddle can weigh about 33 to 38 pounds. If this mythical cowboy customer comes in to order in person, he shouldn't be surprised if Sammy also asks him: "What about some nice taps on those stirrups, cowboy?" Because, for herself, Sammy sure does like a purty pair of those eagle-bill toe fenders, not only for their dress-up look, but because they're a sure safeguard against small feet slipping through a stirrup.

"Also," she says, "when you're riding a green bronc that's feeling extra good, smack him along side the face a few times with a pair of nice long *tapaderas,* and he'll soon learn who's the boss!"

A SINGLE cinch saddle on which the ring is rigged midway between fork and cantle is called a center-fire rig. A two-cinch saddle on which the front ring is directly under the fork and the rear ring directly under the cantle is called a full double or Spanish rig. Move the center-fire ring halfway to the full forward position, and you've got a three-quarter rig, single or double, as you may choose. You can also have a five-eighths or seven-eighths rig. Sammy says most rodeo boys like three-quarters or seven-eighths.

"Horses, as well as men," says Sammy, "influence saddlemaking. Quarter Horses, with their low withers and broad backs, call for wide gullets and flat bars in the saddle tree. It is interesting to note that, unlike the old days, you can no longer tag a cowboy as a Texan or Idahoan or Californian by the style of his saddle. Most good saddles these days are a combination of the beast features of the widely differing old Texas and California styles. But I'll make a saddle any way the rider wants it—unless I can see that it won't be a solid, comfortable job for both horse and man. Then I'll tell him that we Siscos don't make anything but *good* saddles!"

Sammy got bit by the horse bug early, and has always kept a fine saddle horse or two around. Since Dusty died, her favorite is an Arab mare named Dixie. On this mare Sammy won the best-dressed cowgirl and best stock horse trophies at the Redwood City Rodeo last Fourth of July. But what she likes best is riding out in the hills, away from crowds. Her ambition is to settle down some day on a modest cow ranch—with Arab horses to train and ride, and a typewriter on which to pound out a lot of stories and articles of Western lore.

Along with making saddles, Sammy is rated as one of the best professional leather stampers in the country. She free lances her leather designs, and they may be seen not only on Justin boot tops, but on many of the fine saddles made by Hamley, Porter, Olsen-Nolte, Garcia and many others.

Originating her own designs, Sammy Sisco specializes in picturing famous Arabian horses and famous Western scenes on leather, often in color. Her carving adorns belts, purses, hassocks, coffee-table tops, lamp shades, etc., as well as saddles—in short, anything made of leather. An Arabian horse lampshade she made has been valued at $500, and $1,000 couldn't buy the carved saddle she made for her sister Bertha last Christmas.

Incidently, Sammy likes a low cantle and a slick fork. Which means she likes to ride in a saddle with not more than a two- or three-inch rise behind the seat and no bucking roll on the eight- to nine-inch fork to help hold her in the saddle. She admits that such a horseback seat is really best only on gentle horses in flat country.

And I've heard that when the Siscos want a chicken for Sunday dinner, this cowgirl saddlemaker lays aside her leather tools, steps out with her .22 hand gun and shoots its head off!

IN THE last issue Frank Finley, who was All-Around Cowboy at the Elko, Nev., Rodeo in 1948, stuck his neck out with a few cautious predictions about the top-hands who he thought were the biggest threats to take his title away from him in 1949.

Well, it just goes to show that there's no such thing as a good guess about rodeo winners. Or maybe superstitious people will believe that Frank put the whammy on such favorites as Casey Tibbs, Gerald Roberts and, incidentally, himself.

The winner at Elko was Cotton Rosser, a money rider in anybody's book, but not one that Frank picked. Cotton, who in the off-season is a college student, won himself a large hunk of tuition by taking a first in bull-riding and a second in bulldogging, and an extra $250 for the All-Around title. Right behind him was Ike Thommason, also a surprise winner, who went off with bareback honors and second place in saddle bronc-riding behind Bart Clennon.

Casey Tibbs, who all season in the arena has been hotter than a two-dollar pistol, was in the money only once—6th place in bareback riding split with three others.

The RCA champ for '48, Gerald Roberts, could do no better than 4th place in bareback and half of the 6th place money in bull-riding.

Calf-roping champ was J. D. Holleyman and the bulldogging winner was Old Reliable Homer Pettigrew.

And Frank Finley himself? Oh, yes, 5th place in bareback riding.

No matter who wins, though, a show like Elko's Silver State Stampede gives everyone a lot of laughs and a lot of thrills. The spectators got an unscheduled 15 minutes of excitement after Gerald Roberts flipped off his Brahma on the second night, while the arena pickup man struggled with the bull, trying to get him out of the arena. Another Brahma was evidently an old hand at the game. He put up a furious fight while time was in, then apparently heard the buzzer, stopped courteously and allowed his erstwhile enemy to dismount in comfort and safety.

Local railbirds noticed that if rooters count for anything, Cotton Rosser deserved his title. Cotton seemed to be a great favorite among the rodeo hands, who cheered him on heartily whenever he came out of the chutes.

It seemed as though Zeno Farris thought what counted was how *tight* he tied up his calf, not how fast. After one of Zeno's go-rounds it took the arena hands 15 minutes to untie his calf.

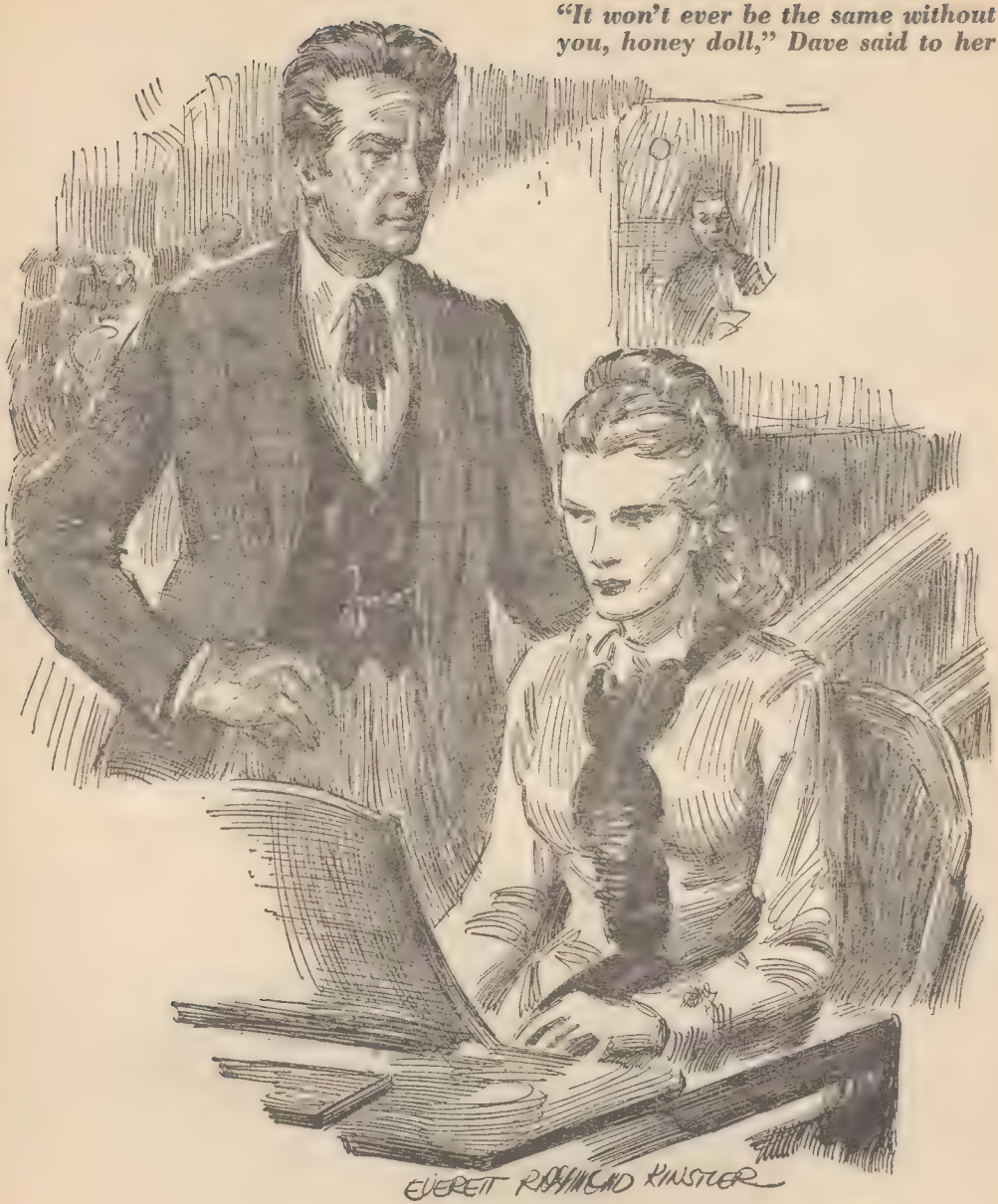
And then there was the time when the Eastern dudes' mouths really hung open. 'Most everyone has heard about the know-how of Western ranch horses, and during one performance the crowd got an eye-witness example of it. Clyde Higginson's horse, without his boss aboard, did an expert job of hazing a steer into the pen. Just figured that was where the steer belonged and attended to it.

The crowds ran to over 10,000 during the three-day show, and the most notable guest was Bing Crosby, who is also the honorary mayor of Elko.

The $5,000 prize money got well split up, even though it wasn't quite the way a rodeo expert predicted. Don't get us wrong, though. We wouldn't dare predict the outcome of a calf-roping event between Midnight and Casey Tibbs, even if Midnight had the rope.

Adios,

THE EDITORS



"It won't ever be the same without you, honey doll," Dave said to her

The Palace on

SUSAN DELEHANTY gathered her valises and bags as the little train, having made the last steep mile to Goldhill with a series of switchbacks, puffed triumphantly to a stop. She jumped off the coach, hugging the bag that held her wedding dress close to her. The huge mountain of golden mine-tailings that was ominously burying the upper part of Assay Street had not, she decided, grown any in the three weeks she'd been gone. But where was Guinn?

Her heart plummeted to her high-top button shoes when the only person she saw was Dave Foster, leaning against the station-house with a lazy ease that suggested all the time in the world. He grinned, his gray eyes lighting warmly.

"Hi, honey doll. How's Goldhill's one and only piano teacher? The place has been dead without you. All loaded down, just like a woman!" He took her bags as if he were the one she'd expected to meet her.

Susan, giving one more quick look around for Guinn, managed a gay smile while her throat was tight with disappointment. That Guinn! "After all," she said blithely, "a girl ought to be loaded down, for her wedding."

"A bride like you doesn't need trappings," said Dave soberly; then his usual light-heartedness chased the gravity from his square-boned face. "I'll help you out home; your friend Guinn is probably dickering with the Assay Street people, trying to get them to sell their homes so he can let that big dump bury some more of the town."

Susan tossed her head, the black curls swinging under the stiff-brimmed sailor hat with its perky veil. "The town ought to be grateful he's bringing business to it! It was simply dying on its feet. With a new mining project—"

"Honey doll, let's not fight," interrupted Dave. "You know where I stand on this business; he's just a stubborn mule to insist on mining right down our main street, turning our homes into stamp mills!"

"Don't call the man I'm marrying a stubborn mule!"

"I was being mighty tolerant," said

SUSAN WAS kept so busy listening to reason that

she almost didn't hear what her heart was saying

Assay Street

By AGNES NAFZIGER

Dave, surprised. "The Three Star is killing Goldhill, bringing in a bunch of roughneck nine-day miners who carouse and wreck the place on Saturday nights."

"At least he's got ambition," she snapped. "He intends to make money so I can have a house with electric lights and plumbing and even a furnace, maybe. He loves me enough to do it."

"For that I don't blame him," admitted Dave, giving her a sidelong glance that brought color to her cheeks. "But, honey doll, I aim to make money too. Wait till you see."

HE STOPPED before a building that had long ago been a livery stable. Big posters covered the front: Dream Palace Theater—Live Moving Pictures—the Most Novel and Remarkable Invention of the Electrical Age—Admission For a Full Show of 20 Minutes, 5c.

"Here we are!" Dave was actually strutting, chest thrust out. "Here it is—my theater."

She stared in astonishment, then she had to smile. "Oh, Dave! What will you do next? A nickelodeon! I went to one in Denver, and they're terrible. That flickering kills your eyes. And when they show the picture of the big engine thundering at you, it's enough to scare the wits out of you. They're dark, gloomy old places—a fad that will die out in no time."

"You think so, do you?" Dave's eyes were bright with excitement. "Well, I don't. I think we're at the beginning of a great new industry. It's not very comfortable now—straight chairs and planks to sit on—but I got the roof fixed so it doesn't leak, and I got it cleaned up spick and span, honey doll, and I got elegant plans for it!"

"You always have elegant plans," she said, with strange bitterness.

"Look," he went on eagerly, "one thing I need—music. I got an old piano in there. How about you playing for the pictures? You know, you play fast when there's a race; slow and soft when it's sad, and sweet tunes for the love scenes. I could pay you one dollar a night, to start with."

For an instant her eyes sparkled; then her glance went to the bag that held her wedding dress. "Guinn wouldn't like it," she said flatly.

"I guess not," admitted Dave. "Well, let's be getting on." They turned in silence up the block-long staircase built on the mountain slope to Aunt Abby's house on Buckskin Road, where Dave left her. . . .

"My, my." Aunt Abby always spoke in a hushed voice as if not to disturb the sorrow that lurked around the corner. "Seems like you bought an awful lot of things," she rambled on. "I don't know what's going to become of us, what with the Three Star trying to buy up and tear down the whole town! I'm too old to pull up my roots; I can't move from this home. You ought to be able to do something with Guinn," went on Aunt Abby. "I'll say this for him, he's crazy about you. You can get him to do anything you want, Susan."

"Not me," she sighed gloomily. "I can't even get him to meet the train when I've been away three whole weeks." She jumped up, staring out the window. "Here he comes! You talk to him while I wash the cinders and dirt off my face." She fled to her room, and came out five minutes later fresh and pretty in starched white shirtwaist and emerald-green skirt, curly black hair brushed into glossy smoothness.

THE STOCKY blond man with the serious, earnest face came toward her eagerly. "Susan, dear!" He put his hands on her shoulders and studied her face. "Your trip wasn't too good for you. You look tired. Even thinner."

"I was homesick," said Susan. Oh, it was good to see him again. There was something so solid, so dependable, about him. He would never gamble his savings on anything so new and untried as a nickelodeon palace. "Didn't you expect me to miss you, Guinn?"

"Of course, my dear." He smiled affectionately. "Your aunt has invited me to stay for supper, but I told her we had so much to talk about we'd better go off by

ourselves. Don't you agree?" His eyes, a strange off-blue that was neither green nor gray, glowed with sudden fires. Susan felt her heart race with happiness. Sometimes she was afraid Guinn was more interested in his Three Star than he was in her—until he looked at her like that. Then she knew everything was all right.

"You have no idea how much trouble I'm having with the people of the town, Susan," he said, the minute they were out of the house. "Here I am, willing to spend a fortune in this place, and all I meet is opposition and even hate. That's what I want to talk to you about. I have a plan to use if everything else fails, but I'd rather not resort to it. I'd like to have everything settled before our wedding. Otherwise I don't see how I can take off time for a honeymoon." Feeling her quick withdrawal, he hurried on. "It's for you that I want success, my dear. It's to give you everything you want—the biggest house in Colorado, the finest of everything. That takes money."

They walked the rest of the way to Assay Street in silence. Guinn gestured toward the line of buildings, homes and stores, on either side, ending with the elegant Bigler Hotel and the famous old opera house on the corner. "I'm offering them twice what the old wrecks are worth!" he said angrily. "I'm even willing to give Dave Foster twice what he paid for that livery stable! You should have heard his answer!"

Susan's lip quirked in spite of herself. Dave would speak right up to the Emperor of India. They were across the street from the Dream Palace; Dave stood there, outside the door, urging passersby to come in and see the show. Even from here Susan could see the happy, excited glow of his face, his broad, cocky grin, and she could hear the warmth of his voice. Impulsively she waved at him, and Guinn drew a sharp breath.

"Susan! Are you by any chance encouraging him? He's the most stubborn ass in the whole town, fighting every move I make!"

"Don't you call my best friend a stubborn ass!" Then her lip quirked again. "He only called you a mule."

"Come on—I'm hungry," he snapped.

Guinn was a fast, heavy eater, and when he ate he did no talking. Susan found she wasn't hungry; she watched him, across the table, and thought they might as well have eaten with Aunt Abby, for all the talking they were doing. Suddenly he pulled out his huge gold watch briskly. "It's late! You don't mind walking home alone, my dear? It's still light, and I have an important business conference."

"I guess not," she said wearily. "I'll see you afterward?"

"Yes, yes. We have a lot to talk over." He strode off, and she watched him as he paid the bill, hoping he'd turn and smile at her. But he didn't, and she felt lonesome, finishing her coffee by herself.

WHEN she left the restaurant, Dave still standing outside the door of Dream Palace. She thought he looked tired and discouraged, but when she got closer she knew she had been mistaken: his shoulders squared and his whole face lit up with a broad grin.

"Step right in, honey doll! Finest show this side the Mississippi; real live moving pictures! You will leap from your seat in astonishment, in delight, in excitement! See the great Empire Express come roaring smack at you!"

"Oh, Dave!" She laughed, her heart lifting. "You've learned fast, haven't you? Big crowd tonight?"

"Well, not too big," admitted Dave, pushing his Stetson to the back of his curly head. "I need music. Can't you just see the difference, if there was some good Delehanty music, piano that is, sounding from in there? People would stop to listen, then they'd go in out of curiosity, and then they'd stay, naturally."

"We've got a phonograph at home, with a great enormous black horn," she said. "I'll let you have that."

He shook his head. "Thanks, but it wouldn't work. It wouldn't change to fit the pictures, like your music."

She peeked through the slightly open

door. It was dark and quiet in there, and on the big canvas nailed to the back wall, flickering, fluttering figures moved in jerky speed.

"Go on in," urged Dave. "See the whole show."

She hesitated a moment, then slipped inside and found a chair in the darkness. They were the same sets of unrelated scenes she had seen in the Denver nickelodeon; here came the Empire Express, roaring straight out of the screen in such a lifelike way that the people in the front rows screamed and some even ran up the aisle, away from it. There was a waltz scene, with a very handsome black-mustachioed gentleman in tails swaying and bending a pompadoured woman in bustle and high black shoes in time to silent music. Music. Susan found her fingers itching to get at the piano and add the touch of life the pictures needed. But Guinn would never understand. . . .

By the time she left, her eyes were accustomed to the darkness and she noted that most of the chairs were empty. Dave greeted her anxiously. "Like it?"

"It's every bit as good as the one I saw in Denver," she assured him. "Thanks, Dave; I'll come again." From the corner she glanced back. Again she got the impression of tiredness, of defeat, in the rangy figure leaning against the stable door.

SHE FELL asleep sitting in the big chair by the window, waiting for Guinn. Aunt Abby shook her gently, waking her. "Susan, get to bed! Guinn was here a little while ago, but he said not to wake you, you looked so tired. He's going up to Skull Mountain and won't be down for three or four days. He says for you to keep trying to make folks like me see the light."

"He means to get you to sell Assay Street to him."

"Have you ever wondered, Susan, if you'll be happy with a man that's got no feeling for a town but to make money out of it? Mark my word, when he gets Assay Street, he'll even want the opera house, our beautiful stone opera house that we built out of our own pockets, meaning it to be a monument forever to our pioneers and gold-seekers. I know you'll have everything that money can bring, Susan, but I'm wondering if you'll be happy."

Susan made no answer. Her eyes blurred with unexpected tears, but she made no move to wipe them away.

"Just be awful sure," called Aunt Abby from her bedroom.

In the days that followed, every time a dynamite charge went off, she jumped in spite of being used to blasting all her life. The dull, muffled roar had become eerie, as if Guinn were dynamiting the little city that defied him. The booms came from above the town on Skull Mountain, where he'd dug the huge glory hole whose tailings had already buried the upper half of Assay Street. The blasts were awfully close to the rest of the street.

After supper she walked down to Assay Street, and there stood Dave in front of the Dream Palace, urging people to come in.

"Business any better?" she asked. There were definitely new lines in his face which his good-natured grin couldn't quite conceal.

"Nope. Still needs music," he said. "Why not try it, just for a spell? Lots of people in town tonight; music would draw 'em this way."

She met his grey eyes; they held no smile, they were very serious. She glanced at the ebony shape of Skull Mountain against the sky. Guinn was up there; he wouldn't care—he wouldn't even know—if she played a little while for Dave.

"For an hour or two, then," she said, and hurried inside to make her way down the aisle to the square grand piano. The scene on the canvas sheet was a parade; that was easy. She did a gay, sparkling march and switched to some rippling music when the pictures changed to ocean waves beating in high and majestic rhythm right against the audience, who recoiled as if they felt the mist. For the fire-engine, drawn by enormous foaming-mouthed horses that also dashed right out of the

screen, she improvised violent chords and runs, making the old piano quiver and shake. The audience screamed and clapped; the whole stable took on a different atmosphere. The pictures came to life with the finishing touch of her gay, spirited piano, and Susan herself felt a bright exhilaration bubble up in her, even though by ten o'clock her head was aching from staring up at the pictures—distorted by the close range, the flickering exaggerated.

DAVE came running down the aisle as the lights went on. "Honey doll, we really had a crowd tonight—by far the biggest we ever had! How about tomorrow night? At this rate, I'll be able to pay you *two* dollars!"

Her starry gaze was suddenly quiet. "Guinn will be down from the mine tomorrow, I'm afraid."

A shout came from the door. A couple of dozen unshaven men in mucky miners' boots, heavy flannel shirts and overalls, stomped into the stable.

Dave turned to face them. "Show's over, gents."

"The hell it is!" Half a dozen bullets hit the ceiling. "We come down to see a show, and we intend to see a show!" The speaker waved to his followers. "Right, my boys?"

"Slip out the side door, Susan, quick—get out of here!" Dave ordered her. But as she started to leave the men saw her.

"Music! Music!" they thundered. "Tickle them ivories, sister! We want music with our pictures!" Three more shots hit the rafters; chairs and plank benches were banged around noisily.

"Give them a show," urged Susan, a little pale. "If I play, they'll get quiet, then I'll slip out soon as they're interested in the pictures." She sat down at the piano, ran her fingers across the keys. The miners yelled approval; Dave shut off the lights and told the boy who ran the film to put on another show. The audience settled down peacefully enough, but as a pack of Indians rode racing ponies down a steep trail to capture the lone hero, the yipping and yelling burst out with renewed force. Susan's ears felt as if they were bursting. This would go on until the pictures were over; they no longer needed music. She made it to the side door without being noticed. But there a broad, dark figure blocked her way.

"Guinn!" she said faintly.

"Susan, how could you do this to me? When someone on the street told me you were playing here, I couldn't believe it."

Her jaws squared as he took her arm and led her outside. "It's fun, Guinn. And you've been too busy to see me."

"Don't you realize I'm up there working for you?" he asked coldly. Then, with an odd grimness, "I see that we had better be married right away. Tomorrow night at dinner we'll make the final plans for our wedding—either Tuesday or Wednesday of next week will be all right."

"We are going to be happy, aren't we, Guinn?"

"Of course we are, Susan. What's gotten into you? I've got a scheme to bring this Assay Street deal to a quick finish, and I think we might as well use it; I'm losing my patience with these people. Also, I've decided to build our house on Skull Mountain, above the mine, where we can overlook the whole canyon."

SHE FELL asleep that night planning the house. It would be the finest one in the mountains, in the whole state. Never again would she have to lug water from a spring; never again hurt her eyes reading by dim lamplight; never again freeze through the long, icy winters in a drafty house with the wind blowing right through the cracks in the walls and floors. She awoke with a start: the house on the mountaintop had turned into a shiny palace on Assay Street—a strange palace shaped like a stable, with moving pictures on every wall.

After breakfast she hurried down the mountain to tell Dave she couldn't play again. She found him sweeping out the stable and setting the chairs to rights. He gave her an anxious smile.

"You all right, honey doll? They scare you to death last night?"

Her throat tightened with a sudden ache. "Of course not, Dave; soon as they got good and noisy, I slipped out."

"I know; I saw you leave. That was a bunch from the Three Star; next time they come down I'll be ready for 'em. I'm going to Denver next week," he went on quickly, "to get some new film and look at new equipment. Haven't got much money to spend yet, but I can do the work myself—make the seats more comfortable, fix up an attractive stage." His grey eyes were alight with enthusiasm. She looked away.

"Dave, Guinn and I are getting married next week."

The glow left his face. "Well, I was expecting it, honey doll. I hear Erma Lewis is back in town—remember she used to play piano before she went east to school? I'll see if I can get her."

Susan was silent. The big stable with its empty chairs and huge blank canvas sheet seemed bare and colorless. Not much to look at in the raw daylight, with its unpainted walls and conglomeration of chairs and benches. The beginning of a dream. A crude, small beginning. But all dreams had to begin somewhere, somehow. Susan felt her eyes sting; she blinked rapidly.

SHE WORE her new plum-colored dress with the white lace at throat and sleeves that night, because this would be a special dinner, at which Guinn and she would plan their wedding. . . .

An hour and a half later she strode angrily from the house, alone. Let him come now—but if he did, she wouldn't be waiting for him. She made her way blindly down the plank stairs. The town was filled with the usual Saturday night crowd—townspeople and ranchers and miners from miles around. For once David didn't need to urge people to come inside the Dream Palace; a long line had formed, waiting to buy tickets.

As Susan stepped beside him, his smile of surprise changed quickly to a friendly greeting. "Ah, honey doll, just in time to see Annabelle herself cavorting on the screen! Followed by the famous Umbrella Dance, the Gondolas of Venice, Kaiser Wilhelm Reviewing His Troops—"

She had to laugh; for the first time in hours the tight aching feeling left her throat. But the laugh ended abruptly as there was a strange rumble, like thunder rolling along the mountain ridge, or like a dozen blasts of dynamite going off at once at once, muted under the earth. Dave and Susan ran into the street to stare up the slope above the buildings, and then everything seemed to happen so fast that Susan could only remember a blur of cloud heading toward them—a cloud filled with boulders and earth.

While she tried to clear the dust from her eyes, Dave pushed his way into the Dream Palace from which the terror-stricken crowd was stampeding. The dull ominous roar went on and on as the great mountain seemed to disintegrate and crumble toward the street, crashing through the roof of the house next door to the Palace as if it were paper. Then she saw Dave, in the stable door.

"Everybody's out!" he cried to the waiting crowd. "Nobody hurt. Nobody hurt."

"Susan! Are you all right?" shouted a hoarse voice. Guinn caught her arm, whirled her to him. "Your aunt said you'd gone downtown, you little fool! Didn't you know—

"Now look, Susan, we couldn't help this. We were blasting on our own territory; we had every right to." Guinn breathed hard. She had never seen his eyes such a pure green, the pupils like ebony pinpoints. "But you can see why I tried to buy up Assay Street; I tried to be fair with the people, offering them a good price. I was afraid this might happen."

"I don't think you've scared them," she said then, scornfully. "It would take more than this to scare our people. And after this they'll be watching out for you."

She walked away from him; if he called to her, she didn't hear him. She wanted to get to Dave quick, before he hired Erma Lewis to play that piano.

An Old Cowpoke

Dear Editor:

The week ends here in Arizona seem awfully long and if I had some pen pals from among your wonderful readers I'd consider myself very lucky indeed. I am 36 years old, tall and dark, and one of my hobbies is collecting picture post cards. This old cowpoke will be hankerin' to hear from you all—real soon.

ROBERT H. WOOD

Box 653,
Tempe, Ariz.

Lonesome Vacationer

Dear Editor:

I have been lonesome since school was let out and wish someone would write to me. I am 18, have blond hair and blue eyes, am 5'10", and weigh 150 lbs. All letters I receive will be answered, so don't be afraid to write. I like all sports and horseback riding. I hope some girls and boys will write to me.

BILL ALLEN

201 Wertz Ave. S.W.
Canton, Ohio

Varied Interests

Dear Editor:

I would like very much to be a member of your pen pal page. I love to write letters, but love most of all to receive them. I am 23, have real dark brown hair and brown eyes. I'm 5'5" tall and weigh 119 lbs. My interests are wide and varied. So come on and write, everybody, please.

SHIRLEY PHELPS

507 Fern
Walla Walla, Wash.

Southern Belle

Dear Editor:

I am a girl of 18, 5'5" tall, and have dark brown hair and green eyes. I love to skate, swim, dance, and ride horseback. I would like to hear from Westerners but everyone else is welcome to write, too. I'll answer each letter and exchange snapshots. My nickname is Joy.

JOYCE STOVER

213 Dunbar Ave.
Dunbar, W. Va.

Friendly Virginian

Dear Editor:

I'm a friendly Virginian lucky enough to be stationed on the Paradise of the Pacific, Guam. I am 6' tall, weigh 160, have blond hair and blue eyes, and am a sports fiend. I like reading, writing and photography too. I have traveled over a lot of the States, several islands of the Pacific, including Hawaii, and would like to tell a lot of people about my travels and life. I have "time on my hands" and would appreciate letters from anyone 16 to 20. I promise to answer all letters and will exchange snapshots with all who write.

PFC GEORGE B. CARTER, AF 13292492
HQ. & B/S Sqdn.
24th A.D. APO 264
c/o PM San Francisco, Calif.

Farmerette

Dear Editor:

I would like very much to have some pen pals. I am 15, weigh 112 and stand 5'3", and have brown hair and blue eyes. I live on a farm, and like sports and love horses. Girls and boys, send some mail my way.

LAURAINE SHEDD

R.F.D. 1
N. Stratford, N.H.

Call from the Wilderness

Dear Editor:

This is a call from the wilderness of Alaska for some pen pals. I am 17, 5'9½" and weigh 145 lbs. I have brown curly hair and blue-green eyes, and fair complexion. I would like to have lots of friends. Come on, fellows and girls, and send me some letters.

ERNEST V. KIRSCH

Sunshine,
A.R.R., Alaska

Soldier Wants Mail

Dear Editor:

I am 21, 6'5" tall, and weigh 195 lbs. I would like to correspond with any girl(s) who would be interested in writing to a G.I. My home is in San Francisco, and I have been stationed at Fort Lewis for almost a year and a half. If any of you readers will write, I promise I'll answer.

PFC EDWARD C. DUBOIS

HQ & HQ Btry.
37th Field Art. Bat.
Fort Lewis, Wash.

THE STORY SO FAR:

Pursued by a posse, wounded SHAN BRADY finds refuge at the Saddlehorn, where MARY LOU McCROY takes pity on him and has SENORA GARCIA and her daughter MELA nurse him back to health. ALVIN FRENCH, a friend of the McCroys, promises secrecy when he discovers Shan's presence on the ranch, though when two deputies come looking for Shan and FROSTY BOWDRE, a supposed partner in robbery and murder, he wonders why Mary Lou is shielding him.

Mary Lou's father, GILL McCROY, disapproving her attachment for cowhand JESS RIDLEY, a heart-breaker, sends her East to school. When she returns two years later Jess Ridley is still footloose, and Gill, not realizing that Mary Lou's feeling for Jess has faded, fires him from the Saddlehorn after a hot argument. Mary Lou is pleased to find that Shan has been working for the Saddlehorn, liked and respected by the cowhands and her irascible father. Alvin French is now building a herd of his own, and will obviously expand to the public domain that Gill has been using for many years.

Mela García has married a ne'er-do-well, CANUTO, who is working for Alvin French, to the distress of his wife. Mary Lou and Shan ride to Mela's poor home, and find that Frosty Bowdre also works for French. When Shan and Bowdre meet it seems apparent to Mary Lou that they haven't met before, though Bowdre pretends otherwise.

When Shan and Mary Lou return to the Saddlehorn her mother runs crying from the house and tells them that Gill's horse has returned riderless, with a blood-stained saddle. She fears that Jess Ridley, angry over his discharge, has taken vengeance on her husband.

The girl dropped into a chair and began to cry broken-heartedly

SADDLEHORN

PART TWO

AS HE topped the ridge east of Torcido Canyon, Canuto Vigil paused for a brief cautious look around him. He noted that the wind was strong in his face, so he risked rolling a smoke, taking a few puffs before he threw it down to continue his stealthy hunt.

He studied the fresh tracks in the beaten dirt of the trail, decided that the big buck had not yet winded nor sighted him and moved on with his in-toeing, springy walk. He had on soft-soled Indian moccasins, and he knew how to move in the woods like a slim, flitting black shadow. His black eyes were sparkling with the eagerness of a hound dog on a hot trail, but even so he didn't forget to throw a cautious look around every now and then.

He was on Saddlehorn territory now. He knew that Shan Brady hadn't been making idle threats yesterday about what the Saddlehorn crew would do to him if

KINGDOM

BY ELSA BARKER

any of them caught him here. Yesterday Shan had scared him plenty—and in a way he was still scared—but just enough to lend a little savor to the hunt.

His heart was hot with wrath against the Saddlehorn crew—Gill McCroy, Jess Ridley, and Shan Brady—and he thought with malicious delight how after he had killed and dressed out the buck he would leave the entrails by the branding corral where they would be sure to be found soon.

Today there was scarcely any danger—he had worked for the Saddlehorn long enough to know the after-spring round-up habit of a Sunday afternoon siesta—but just the same he was being careful.

He paused again a moment to study the tantalizingly fresh buck tracks.

As he started to move on, he heard a shot. Almost instinctively he dropped flat on his face, the the next instant realized that he could not have been seen.

He got to his feet again and ran swiftly, shuttling silently through the trees for a hundred yards, until he could look down into the canyon.

Almost immediately his sharp eyes picked out the body of the dead buck lying close by the stream. Then he saw the two blue-shirted, denim-clad horsemen, both of them riding tall brown horses.

From this distance he could not recognize either man for sure, but he knew that only the week before Alvin French had shipped in twenty-five new brown horses from the *333* ranch over in Texas.

Canuto took another step along the trail, then suddenly stopped, as he saw another rider round a bend in the canyon, coming fast. Even at this distance there was no mistaking that horesman. There was not another man around who was that big and broad. His silvery white hair showed even under the broad hat, and his horse was a tall, strong dun that Canuto knew very well.

THE YOUNG MEJICANO half raised his rifle for a shot of warning to the first two riders, then lowered it again. A wicked grin showed his strong white teeth.

Some of these new riders for Señor French were from the plains country, and they had sometimes been free with their comments about "damned greasers." He would let them settle their own troubles.

He moved to the shelter of a wide-trunked tree, and squatted on his heels. Knowing Señor McCoy, he thought this was going to be fun.

Now the two men had heard the other horse coming, but instead of turning to their own horses and trying to make a run for it, they just stood there.

Canuto jumped to his feet and yelled as he saw one of the men raise his rifle. The sound of a shot seemed to rock him back on his heels almost as if it had hit him. His jaw went slack with horror.

Old Gill McCroy's tall dun whirled and lunged away. The rifle cracked again, and the old man toppled limply out of the saddle.

Canuto's own gun slid to his shoulder. For a moment he had the taller of the two men in his sights, then with a shudder he eased the rifle butt to the ground again.

He watched the two men get on their horses and ride slowly down the canyon, almost as if this had been a pre-arranged meeting and they had done what they intended.

Canuto stood where he was for a long time. One part of him was urging him desperately to turn and run back the way he had come, find his horse and get home quickly.

The other part—the woodsman part—was urging him to go down there. He knew that horses—even two brown horses almost as alike as two peas out the same pod—might make different tracks. He had seen which man fired the shot, and which horse he was on. If there was anything different about those tracks, his sharp woodsman's eyes could pick it up.

But he stood where he was, waiting for a long time. Three rifle shots might bring other Saddlehorn cowboys.

Finally, almost reluctantly, he moved on down the hill, but now he kept away from the soft dirt in the trail. He picked the spots where there were needles and leaves or stepped from rock to rock, stopping to look and listen every few steps. He knew very well what would happen if he were caught with Gill McCroy's body, near the body of a freshly killed deer, or even if his soft moccasin prints were found. There were other men in the Saddlehorn crew who had sharp coyote eyes too.

But a new greed urged him on as he remembered the thick moneybelt Gill McCroy was said to wear around his waist, the beautiful pearl-handled, silver-inlaid, six-shooter that Canuto had always secretly coveted.

SHAN BRADY, riding fast through the swiftly gathering dusk, met Dunc Patterson and old Benedito García bringing home Gill McCroy's body. They had found him, Dunc explained briefly, just about where Stella McCroy had sent them—a mile up Torcido Canyon, where it wid-

ened out into a series of small, grassy benches.

He had been shot squarely in the chest, not with a sixgun, but with a rifle. His own pistol and moneybelt were gone.

Old Benedito swore softly and lengthily in Spanish.

"There was a fresh-killed buck layin' about fifty yards upstream from him," Dunc went on soberly. "A lot of horse tracks—an' we think the tracks of two men—but it was gettin' late an' we didn't have time to check that for sure."

Shan felt a sickness at heart thinking of Canuto Vigil. If he had done his duty as old McCroy had ordered it, the day before, all this wouldn't have happened.

Back at the Saddlehorn, two white-faced women greeted them without tears. It seemed odd to Shan that now it was Gill McCroy's iron-spined, rough-talking old sister who fell into a fit of hysterics, and had to be put to bed and quieted with sedatives. Stella McCroy, frail-looking and gentle-speaking as she was, had somehow found a store of courage inside herself that possibly she had never known she possessed. With her daughter, she did the things that had to be done, her heartbreak showing only in the deep blue eyes, the pinched, white line from nose to lips. She ordered her husband's body brought into his own bedroom. Then she turned to Dunc Patterson.

"Dunc, you ride to town and notify the sheriff, and—the undertaker." For a moment her voice broke, then quickly she pulled herself together. "Shan, come with me. I want to talk to you."

He followed her and Mary Lou into the living room.

"Mary Lou tells me you are talking of leaving the Saddlehorn."

"Yes, ma'am."

"I want you to stay."

The cowboy shifted his feet uncomfortably.

Mrs. McCroy dropped wearily into a chair. Mary Lou went around to stand beside her, her hand light on her mother's shoulder.

"Sit down, Shan," the older woman said. "I'm not going to be very fair with you. I know you're feeling sorry for me right now, and won't be able to say no when I beg you to help me."

"No, I couldn't refuse you that, ma'am. You folks have been mighty good to me."

"I want you to take over the Saddlehorn, Shan. I want you to stay on as manager. I want you to find the man who killed my husband."

The Cowboy's eyes dropped before her steady gaze.

"Mrs. McCroy, you're askin' a lot. I'd sure like to help you, anyway I can, but you'd better get somebody else for this job. You don't know nothin' about me—where I came from, nor why. And things are so I can't tell you. You've got better men on the Saddlehorn than I am. Men that have been here longer."

"No *better* men, Shan," she said. "I know that you were in some kind of trouble in Texas. But Gill didn't make snap judgments, and when he did make up his mind he didn't make mistakes. We trust you, too—don't we, Mary Lou?"

"Yes," the girl said. "We do!"

The cowboy raised his head after a moment. "I'll stay, ma'am, for a while anyhow. An' I'll do any job you put me at."

She smiled at him gratefully.

Mary Lou went to the door with him. "I'm glad you're staying," she said softly.

For a moment he wondered what would happen if he put his arms around her and told her what he had started to say a few hours ago. But there were a lot of reasons now why he couldn't do that.

"I'll do the best I know how."

IT WAS after midnight when Dunc Patterson got back with the coroner and the sheriff.

From his Spanish mother, Sheriff Dave Wilcox had inherited a small, lean body and a dark, hawk-featured face with snapping black eyes and hair. He had a fairly good education, and had gone into the law enforcement business because he liked the tang of adventure.

Now, instead of going to bed and waiting for daylight, he went to work.

He called Shan and Dunc Patterson into Gill McCroy's bedroom while the saddle-weary old doctor made his examination. As a matter of routine, they searched the dead man's clothes. In his right hip pocket they found a crumpled, pencil-written note, apparently torn out of a pad of cheap scratch paper.

The sheriff read it, grunted with surprise, then after a moment's hesitation handed it to Shan Brady.

"Dear Mary Lou," he read. "Please meet me at the old spot in Torcido Canyon, tomorrow at two. I've got something important to tell you. Jess."

Dunc Patterson was reading over Shan's shoulder. He sucked in his breath, in a half whistle.

"So that's why the old man went up there!"

Sheriff Wilcox was watching them both shrewdly. He reached for the note, tucked it carefully in his notebook.

"Would you boys say that's Jess's writing?"

Shan shook his head. "I don't know."

"Me either," said Dunc.

Wilcox took a couple more folded sheets of paper out of the back of his notebook, flipped them open and held them out for Shan to see. The cowboy didn't need to read them to see what they were. They were "wanted man" posters for Shan Brady and Frosty Bowdre, alias Frosty Bonnell—wanted for murder and robbery.

The cowboy's lips tightened. "I see I didn't go far enough."

"I've had these for about a year," the sheriff said. "I showed 'em to Gill McCory one day. He said he already knew it, but that you was a good man and to let you alone."

Shan's eyes dropped to the still, white face on the bed—somehow majestic and proud even in death. He swallowed hard.

"He was a mighty good man to work for," he said.

Sheriff Wilcox tucked the papers back inside his notebook, and put it in his pocket.

"I hear that Frosty Bonnell has set up housekeeping with a bunch of his toughies over on French's Triangle Bar, where he'll be neighbors with the Saddlehorn. You know anything about that, Shan?"

"I learned it this afternoon," the cowboy said quietly. "I didn't know it before, if that's what you mean."

"That's what I meant all right," the sheriff said dryly. "You seen or heard from Frosty since this fracas back in Texas?"

"No."

Shan met the sheriff's black eyes steadily, but he couldn't tell whether Wilcox believed him or not. The sheriff nodded.

"All right. Shan, you go rouse the boys in the bunkhouse, and line 'em up on the *portal*. I'll talk to 'em one at a time in the living room. While I'm doin' that, Dunc, I want you to look through their stuff. See if you can find the tablet this note to Mary Lou came out of."

He stopped a minute, then went on thoughtfully, "This points pretty square at Jess—maybe too square. Dunc tells me he had a hell of a row with the old man yesterday over the girl, that Gill kicked him off the place. If they met in Torcido Canyon again today they might have fought, but somehow it sticks in my mind that it ain't like Jess to have killed him long distance with a rifle."

He stopped again, then turned directly to Shan. "It's my hunch now that the old man was right about you too, Brady. He an' I didn't always see eye to eye on everything, but just the same, his judgment of men was pretty sound. That don't mean I won't keep watchin' you."

"I savvy," Shan said. "An' thanks."

A search of the bunkhouse brought the remnants of two pencil tablets to light. One had originally belonged to Skip Causey, the other to Sam Trigg, an old-timer who had been with the Saddlehorn for thirty years, but every cowboy on the place had used them at one time or another. Both Sam and Skip, however, denied that Jess had borrowed their tablets the night before, or that he had tarried long enough to write a note. After his quarrel with McCroy he had packed his belongings and left, *pronto*.

THE NEXT morning when they showed the note to Mary Lou, her face whitened. She raised stricken eyes to the sheriff.

"I never saw this," she whispered. "I—I wonder where Dad got it?"

"Do you know if it's Jess's handwriting?"

The girl had started to hand the note back. Now she looked at it again. She started to speak, then stopped. She looked first at the sheriff, then at Shan Brady, her eyes troubled.

"I—I can't be sure. I don't think so. He always called me Princess."

A sudden doubt about whether she was telling the truth stabbed through Shan. As if she had seen the doubt in the sheriff's face, the girl suddenly whirled, dropped into a chair and began to cry broken-heartedly.

Shan took an instinctive step toward her, then stopped, his hands clenched at his sides. It was old Dunc Patterson who dropped to his knee beside her chair, put his wiry old arms around her, and let her cry on his shoulder.

In a way most of the Saddlehorn cowboys had feared their boss, but they had also respected and loved him. Reluctantly, for most of them liked Jess Ridley too, they had let out what they knew of the old man's quarrel with Jess, and also McCroy's long-standing feud with Canuto Vigil.

The sheriff had each Saddlehorn cowboy copy the note and sign Jess's name to it. When he compared the writing, he had to admit that to an inexperienced eye it didn't seem likely that any of the Saddlehorn crew had written the note that called the old man out to his death.

What else the sheriff may have learned that he thought had some bearing on the case remained a secret between him and his little black notebook. But he did take Shan and Benedito García along with him to Torcido Canyon. Or rather he took Shan, and when the Mexican *vaquero* tagged along, he didn't send him back.

Shan knew what was in Benedito's mind. Like everyone else on the Saddlehorn, he was torn between divided loyalties. Benedito had never liked his son-in-law, but Canuto was the man Mela had married, and for his daughter's and his grand-daughter's sake he didn't want him turned up as a murderer.

In Torcido Canyon they found nothing to add to what Dunc Patterson and Benedito had seen the night before. Tracks were pretty well messed up, but it seemed fairly certain that there had been two men together. They followed the tracks of two horses out of the canyon, but lost them where the trail faded out on the grassy flats.

The sheriff pulled up his horse and rolled a smoke.

"You say Jess has gone to work for French?" he asked.

Shan nodded. "I saw him takin' French's orders."

The sheriff squinted through a haze of smoke at Benedito.

"And Canuto?"

The little *Mejicano* shrugged and scowled. He looked away across the flats and said blandly, "Mela came home to us thees morneeng! She been weeping the eyes out! She say Canuto come home yesterday night—then leave! She don' know where! She don' know why!"

The sheriff swore. "Why didn't you tell me this before?"

Benedito looked at him innocently. He shrugged. "You don' ask me!"

FOR THE first time in quite a few hours Shan Brady felt like grinning. He knew Benny wasn't as simple as he sounded. He had himself been up against that blank, bland wall of tell-nothing a few times. Now, after thinking the business over all night and all morning, by some due process of mind Benny had decided to tell what he knew. No one could have gotten it out before.

The sheriff mixed a few English and Spanish cuss words, looked at Shan and shrugged.

"Let's go!" he said, and headed out toward the distant hills in the direction of Alvin French's new Triangle Bar.

Today the place was bustling with activity. Half a dozen native workmen were laying up adobes in the walls of the big house. Out by one of the corrals two strange cowboys were trying to shoe a bunch of broncs, and having a tough time.

But French himself was not in sight. Neither were Frosty Bonnell, Jess Ridley nor Canuto Vigil.

Mela's adobe hut looked closed up, with the curtains drawn. Somehow even after only a few hours it had the look of a place permanently abandoned.

At the top of the little round-topped hill Sheriff Dave Wilcox pulled up his horse. He looked down toward the working cowboys, who had apparently never even glanced up, and then back toward the cabin.

"I wonder if Canuto's place is locked?"

Benedito produced a key. "I don' theenk we find notheeng here," he said. "That Canuto he's smart like devils!"

Shan stopped a dozen steps behind the other two men, his eyes studying the layout of buildings carefully. Now he saw one of the Triangle Bar cowboys step to a saddled horse and swing up. Not too hurriedly but with a purposeful look, he rode off in a northerly direction that would soon put him behind the butt of one of the near hills.

Shan touched the sheriff's arm as he was about to step inside the cabin.

"I think I'll take a pasear around a couple of hills."

The sheriff's bright eyes sharpened.

"You got the wind up about somethin'?"

Shan shrugged. "Everything looks awful calm. One of those boys just took out to tell the boss we're here, an' I'd sorta like to see where he goes."

For a moment the sheriff didn't answer, his alert eyes narrowing, as if turning things over in his mind fast. If Frosty Bonnell and Shan had been partners in crime back in Texas, it could be that Shan was trying to steal away for a private meeting.

"All right," he said finally. "Me an' Benny can tend to this."

His tone was a little too pleasant. Shan grinned faintly.

"Figgerin' to give me plenty of rope?" he asked.

The sheriff shrugged. "I hope you ain't fixin' to hang yourself."

"Not a-purpose," Shan said dryly.

He turned his horse back in the direction from which they had come until he was around the bend of the hill, then he cut sharply back, circling northward, hoping to cut the trail of the cowboy that had just left the Triangle Bar.

A mile and a half from the new Triangle Bar set-up, he heard the low, organ-like bawling of cattle. This was on a pocket of Public Domain that Gill McCroy had always claimed but seldom used very heavily. There were rich pockets of grass in here, but dotted so sparsely between rough, rocky canyons and ridges that Saddlehorn cattle rarely used them.

ALTHOUGH Saddlehorn cowboys had been warned to be on the lookout for them, so far no cows bearing the new Triangle Bar brand had been sighted on the range. But from the sounds Shan guessed that French's cowboys were working a bunch just over the next hill.

He slowed his horse to listen, then decided to ride boldly into whatever was cooking. As he looked down the slope at the bawling, bunched cattle in the canyon below he felt a shock of surprise.

He had had a certainty that here he would find a bunch of fat, red-backed, stolen cattle—some that he might recognize as from the Saddlehorn, perhaps others from the Tumbling H, twenty miles to the east, or the Rocking A, as far to the south.

But these bawling, pitiful cows were such as this rich grass country had probably never seen before. They were long-horned, motley colored, and so skinny that it looked as if they would have to be kept bunched tight together to keep them all from falling over.

There was a branding fire going, and eight cowboys were working the herd with a speed and skill Shan couldn't help admir-

ing. There were about a hundred cows in the bunch, and half of them had already been re-branded.

As he approached, Shan could see that the crazy assortment of brands they had originally worn had been left untouched, but in addition they now wore a big Triangle Bar. It was normal cow work.

Frosty Bonnell had seen him coming, and turned his job on the rope over to one of the other cowboys. He rode a dozen yards to meet Shan, an easy grin on his big face.

"Hi, Shan!" Frosty spoke like one good neighbor to another. He waved a big arm at the bawling cows. "Mighty fine lookin' bunch ain't they? If we can keep 'em from dyin' for a week or ten days, French'll clean up a pile of money on 'em when they're fat this fall."

"Where did such stock come from?"

"Mexico. Just unloaded 'em this morning. They've had drouth down there, an I bought 'em for practically nothin'." He hesitated a moment, then added deliberately. "We're shippin' more in—a couple of thousand more. I dickered for them last week."

"Where you figger on grazin' 'em?"

"Right here." The big man batted his pale eyes at Shan. "Now look here—French has been doin' a heap of ridin' an' keepin' his eyes open, an' learnin'. Old Gill McCroy's got a hundred and fifty thousand acres that he owns outright. He's got two hundred thousand more of public domain that he's been claimin' for forty years, more damn grass than he knows what to do with. He's never run more than four thousand head, which he can keep on his own land. We're movin' in on the public domain. French figgers it's somebody else's turn."

Shan knew there was some truth in what he said. It was one of the reasons he had told Mary Lou McCroy he was leaving the Saddlehorn, when he saw this trouble heading up. A man could be willing to lose even his life fighting for something he thought was right, but it was different when he was at least halfway in the wrong. Legally, French probably had as much right to this grass as McCroy did. But the way he'd gone about starting this ranch was not the way a fair and honest man would do it.

This time Gill McCroy hadn't had a chance to decide whether he wanted to fight or willingly give up some of his range. He had been killed before he even knew he had another fight on his hands, and Shan had promised a helpless, heart-broken woman that he would do the best he could to run her ranch the way it had always been run. Now he hesitated. He took out the makin's and rolled a smoke.

"There's some right in what you say," he said finally. "Ol' Gill McCroy's dead. I reckon you already know that. And I promised his wife I'd stay on a while as manager. I'll talk to her an' see what she says. Maybe she'll want to make some kind of compromise with Alvin French."

Frosty Bonnell grinned and shrugged. "Compromise, hell!" he said scornfully. "I tell you we're movin' in! The Saddlehorn can like it or they can fight, we don't much care which!" He looked over Shan's shoulder. "The sheriff ain't with you?"

"He's within gunshot sound," Shan drawled, "if you was figgerin' to open the fight now."

Frosty grinned again and shook his head. "Hell, no!" he said. "I like you, Shan. I was just goin' to make you a proposition." He threw a quick glance over his shoulder, then lowered his voice. "This is a big thing we've got here, cowboy. Why don't you join us? I'll see that French gives you a good cut out of it. Not just regular wages, but three or four times what you're gettin' on the Saddlehorn."

Shan's lips tightened for a moment, then grinned dryly.

"You already know the answer to that one, Frosty."

For a moment the big man didn't answer, then he shrugged.

"Yeah, I reckon I do," he agreed. "But I'm warnin' you—you'd better move on west an' hunt you another job!"

"You know the answer to that, too!"

Frosty batted his pale eyes. "Maybe not," he shrugged. "Remember that I know a few things about you I reckon you don't

want told. This Sheriff Wilcox, an' ol' Gill McCroy, thought they knew enough to give you God's blessing an' forgive you. But I reckon you wouldn't much like it if I was to write a letter to a certain sheriff back in Texas!"

Shan's face had whitened as he got the other man's meaning.

"I ain't goin' to run, Frosty," he said quietly. "But if you write that letter I'll be obliged to kill you!"

Frosty Bonnell blinked. Without waiting for an answer Shan spurred his horse around him. "I'm goin' to talk to Jess Ridley!"

For a moment cold chills puckered his spine as he turned his back on the other man. Then the prickly feeling stopped. Frosty Bonnell was an outlaw, thief, a killer, but there was a quality of hard pride in the man. Shan didn't believe he would shoot any man in the back in cold blood.

AS HE rode closer to the crew at work, the cowboy eyed them carefully. They were a rough, tough bunch, all young, some only fuzzy-faced kids in their teens.

Shan put up a beckoning hand, and Jess Ridley rode away from the herd to meet him. His hat had as dashing a tilt to it as ever, and there was a reckless ease in the way he sat his saddle. His teeth flashed white in a wide grin.

"Hi, Shan!"

There was nothing defiant in his friendly smile, and nothing guilty. He certainly didn't have the look of a young cowboy who had just murdered an old man in cold blood.

These two had been good friends in the two years they had worked together on the Saddlehorn, and in spite of the blackness of the evidence against him, Shan had found it hard to believe that Jess was a murderer. He believed it even less now.

"I reckon you know that Gill McCroy is dead?"

Jess's eyes met Shan's steadily.

"An' a damn good riddance, too, I'd say! Somebody saved me a job!"

That was about what Shan had expected him to say. Jess had never been a hand to hold his tongue just to be nice.

Shan was suddenly aware that Frosty Bonnell had ridden up close behind him and was listening. Shan half turned his pony so he could face both men.

He said to Jess, "You knew Gill had been killed?"

"Sure."

"How'd you know it so quick?"

Jess hesitated. Then he said slowly, "That's my business!"

Shan shrugged. "The sheriff found a note in the ol' man's pocket signed with your name—to Mary Lou—asking her to meet you in Torcido Canyon, Sunday. That's why he rode up there!"

Jess's face went slack with surprise.

Frosty Bonnell said, "Good God!" and when Shan looked at him he saw that his pale eyes were bleak with anger.

Jess Ridley's chin got a stubborn, defiant look about it.

"I didn't write Mary Lou no note," he said sharply. "I met her comin' in the other day an' suggested a picnic up Torcido Canyon where we used to meet sometimes. She didn't say she would, and she didn't say she wouldn't. I went up there about noon an' hung around till one o'clock. When she didn't come, I didn't wait any longer." He stopped for a minute and his eyes narrowed in anger. "You accusin' me, Shan?"

"No. I'm just tellin' you a few of the things the sheriff is likely to say to you!"

"Well, I ain't runnin'! I'd have got McCroy some day—if he'd lived. But I wouldn't have done it at fifty yards, with a rifle!"

"So you even know about that?"

Jess flushed, his eyes still angry and defiant.

"Hell, I know a lot! But I didn't know about that note. I'd sure like to see it!"

Frosty Bonnell put in softly: "Jess was with me and Mr. French from two o'clock Sunday afternoon till around dark."

Shan's eyes narrowed. "So you even know about what time it happened?"

Frosty shrugged, grinned faintly, but didn't answer.

"I can think of two answers to that," Shan said. "Either some of you Triangle Bar waddies were there when it happened —or some one of our crew is spying for you."

Frosty shrugged again, his pale eyes cold.

"Suit yourself," he said easily. "You seem good at workin' puzzles." He laughed. "Shucks, man whyn't you think over my proposition? Us Triangle Bar boys hang together! You'll never find out who killed McCroy! Join us an' we'll take care of you, too. Fight us an' you'll grab hell by the tail! The day of the Saddlehorn Kingdom is done! You've got nothin' but a bunch of old men an' boys workin' for you! You're on the skids for a fast downhill slide!"

This time it was Shan's turn to shrug, as he turned away.

"Maybe," he said. "At least you gave me warnin', which is more than ol' Gill got!"

"Think it over!" Frosty yelled after him as he rode away.

SHAN was thinking it over, but not in quite the way the other man had meant. He was thinking that Frosty Bonnell had practically admitted that some one of the Triangle Bar had killed Gill McCroy—and that he knew which one.

Proving it on one of them was going to be something different, if they chose to hang together as Frosty had promised they would. But there ought to be some way to find a crack in their armor.

Then he thought of Canuto Vigil. He rolled himself a smoke, thinking that it always seemed as if a man could think clearer with a cigarette in his mouth.

The new Triangle Bar crew were mostly tough young 'uns from Texas, Frosty Bonnell had boasted. And Shan had been around enough to know of the feeling that frequently existed between Texans and Mexicans.

It occurred to him that Frosty wouldn't have made that impudent boast about the Triangle Bar crew hanging together if he had been speaking in protection of the young *vaquero*.

Yet something Canuto had told his wife had so frightened the girl that she had returned to her father's house. Today Canuto was gone.

Knowing the young *Mejicano's* woodswise ways, and his habit of popping up where least expected, Shan didn't think it too unlikely that he, too, had been in Torcido Canyon Sunday afternoon. If so, today he was either hiding out in some of these remote hill canyons—or lying dead as a penalty for seeing too much.

On sudden impulse, instead of turning back to the Saddlehorn headquarters as he had intended, he took a roundabout, hilly course toward Torcido Canyon again.

At the spot where Gill McCroy had been killed, horses and men had tromped out any chance of picking up a fresh clue that some eagle-eyed cowboy wouldn't have already seen.

Shan rode slowly up the canyon, eying with a new intentness half a dozen rough ridges that came down to box in the canyon. On any one of those ridges Canuto Vigil could easily have stayed hidden and watched the killing down below.

From one of the side canyons a horse and slim girl rider suddenly showed, coming down at a sliding trot. Seeing the cowboy, she slowed her horse down almost to a stop, as if reluctant to meet him; then she came on again.

Because he didn't like her being here and what it seemed to mean, and because he had seen that moment's hesitation, Shan's voice was rough.

"What are you doing here, Mary Lou?"

Mary Lou's chin went up a notch.

"Haven't I a right to be here if I want to?" Then the flare of anger died out of her eyes, leaving them desperate and unhappy again. She spurred her horse closer to the cowboy. "Shan, don't let's quarrel. I came up here to—"

"To see if you could figger out whether Jess was really here Sunday afternoon or not?"

Color came up into her cheeks, and her eyes dropped.

"Yes."

"He's not denying that he was."

The girl caught her breath sharply.

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"Whether or not he killed Dad," she said unsteadily, "it's my fault. Whoever wrote that note used that old affair between Jess and me to toll Dad out to his death!"

Shan leaned over in the saddle, reached out a hand and covered the small fist clenched around the saddle horn.

"You're not makin' sense!" he said sharply. "They used you an' Jess to coax him out here, but they aimed to kill him. If you hadn't been home they'd have thought of some other excuse that would have worked just as well!"

Her eyes widened. Under his hand he felt her tense fist begin to relax. She sighed deeply, as if the tension inside her had snapped.

"Thank you, Shan."

He gave her hand a little squeeze, then pulled his hand back as if the touch had burned him.

HIS MIND went back to that day almost two years ago when she had suddenly appeared at his side as he'd knelt by the stream for a drink. It had seemed to him then that the unquestioning kindness and compassion in her soft, dark eyes made her the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

He had thought about her a lot in the fevered days after that, as he lay in the little García cabin. He had told himself that the memory of her beauty had been a part of the fever, but it was a memory that he kept close to his heart.

It wasn't that he had been in love with her all that time; rather it was that she had been to him like a lovely picture that had moved him strongly, and made a better man of him. As bitter as the taste of gall in his mouth was the knowledge that none of these things could he ever say.

For two years he had escaped it, but he knew that with Frosty Bonnell around, and with Alvin French knowing as much as he did, at any time the long arm of Texas law could reach out and grab him.

He was suddenly aware that the girl was watching him.

"Shan," she said softly, "you look so terribly unhappy. What's the matter? Were you in love with Mela? Is that it?"

He gave her a startled look, then smiled grimly, thinking how far wide of the mark she was.

"Mela is one of the prettiest, nicest girls I ever knew," he said. "But I'm not in love with her. I never was."

"Then why did you want to leave?"

He shrugged. "Forget that," he said shortly. "I'll stay as long as you folks need me." He hesitated a moment, then added slowly, "Or rather I will on one condition—you stop seeing Ridley!"

He saw her eyes open wide, whether with surprise or anger he couldn't quite figure. Then they dropped, and he saw color come up into her cheeks.

"Why not, Shan?"

"Because he ain't good enough for you."

He eyed her bent head grimly, hoping he had the courage to hold his tongue. Deliberately he scalded his heart with a deeper hurt. "Maybe some day some man will come along that is."

The color in her cheeks deepened. But when she raised her eyes there was only a mocking smile on her lips.

"I'm not as good as you think I am, Shan!"

He looked at her gravely. "I think you ought to know it was Jess that Mela was in love with. But after making her think he wanted to marry her, he wouldn't. It nearly broke her heart. That's one reason why your father didn't want him hanging around you. He never figured Jess was a man to count on, where women was concerned."

Mary Lou gasped. "I—I never even guessed that," she said slowly. "Jess used to flirt with all of us!"

"You'll promise what I asked?"

"You don't even need to ask it. I'm not in love with Jess. I—I think I love somebody else!"

His tips tightened, and suddenly he looked away.

"I don't mind telling you," she went on in a low voice, "that it wouldn't matter to

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me what a man's past was—if I loved him. Even if he was wanted for robbery—and murder—back in Texas. I—I don't think I'd even believe those things about him, no matter what anyone said!"

Shan Brady winced as if she had struck him, then his shoulders straightened.

"You don't know what you're saying!" he said roughly. "Let's get back to the ranch!"

She shook her head almost angrily. "You do punish yourself, don't you, Shan?" she asked gently. "You hadn't ever seen Frosty Bonnell until day before yesterday! Some day you're going to tell me the truth about that."

Without answering, Shan moved his horse on down the trail. After a moment he heard her coming behind him.

OUT AHEAD a poor old whitish roan cow meandered slowly down from one of the little side canyons. There was a big, curlicued Spanish-style brand almost covering her right side; and behind it a newer, neat Triangle Bar on her right hip.

The cow looked at the horse and rider without interest, then instead of moving *pronto* out of the trail as one of the fat and lively Saddlehorn cows would have done, she reached out and began nibbling on a stalk of tall cane cactus.

Shan Brady pulled up his horse and watched her for a minute. One year down in south Texas he had seen drouth-poor cattle such as these eat cactus as a last resort against starvation, then go on feeding on it even when there was grass to be had.

Mary Lou had reined up beside him.

"It's a terrible thing for animals—or people—to have to be hungry."

Shan nodded. He watched the cow a moment, then his hand dropped to the gun at his hip. Mary Lou caught his arm.

"Don't do it, Shan!" she begged. "Don't kill her just because she's on Saddlehorn land! I know they mean trouble, but let's try to work it out some other way first!"

Shan shook his head without looking at her. "Leave me alone, Mary Lou. I can find out something from that cow."

Reluctantly she let her hand fall away. Shan's shot dropped the cow in her tracks, seemingly too tired and poor to give a reflex kick.

Shan stepped off his horse and handed the reins to the girl.

"This won't take but a few minutes." He took out his knife, whetted the big blade against his chaps, then split open the old cow's belly. He pulled out the two stomachs, cut them open and dumped the scanty contents on the ground. Carefully he examined their tough inner linings.

Mary Lou watched him, frowning, but without further protest.

"Cross and double-cross!" he said. "I'll be damned!"

Mary Lou still looked puzzled. Shan grinned at her.

"Maybe I found what I needed up here after all. Let's get back to the house."

As they rode Shan's mind was planning ahead. All the troubled doubts about what was the right thing to do had left him since his last talk with Frosty Bonnell.

THE TIME was undoubtedly coming when the Saddlehorn would have to share some of its wealth of public domain with other ranchers, but that time hadn't come yet. Until they had decent, law-abiding neighbors to the west and north, the Saddlehorn would fight to keep what they had.

This afternoon he had counted eight young, competent waddies working the Triangle Bar herd. Alvin French—and Canuto Vigil, if he showed up again—added to that, would give them a sizable crew. And perhaps some of the *Mejicano* adobe laborers at the house could be counted on to take a hand in a fight.

The Saddlehorn, on the other hand, was short-handed now, since Gill McCroy had fired Canuto and Jess Ridley. There were the three old-timers, Dunc Patterson, Sam Trigger and Slim Billings—still good cow-

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hands, but nearing their sixties, who had been with the Saddlehorn almost since the first. There were two young *Mejicano* roustabouts, and loyal old Benedito García, Skip Causey and Shan. It wasn't crew enough to hope to carry on a first-class range war.

He had been trying to figure out what wise old Gill McCroy would do if he were still alive, and now he had the answer.

Back at the headquarters he neither told the women what he aimed to do, nor asked permission to do it. He called Dunc Patterson into the little room Gill McCroy had used as an office, and shut the door.

"I think some one of our crew is spyin' for the Triangle Bar," he said bluntly.

"Skip's been doin' a heap of night ridin' lately," Dunc said reluctantly. "Claims he's got a girl down below the mesa close to French's store."

"You know if he was out last night?"

Dunc nodded. "An' the night before that. I been keepin' an eye on him today."

"That's about what I figgered," Shan said. "Skip musta been the one to slip that note in an' leave it where the old man would find it—even if he didn't write it himself."

Dunc Patterson had a trick of blinking his pale blue eyes when he was worried.

"Shan, it looks like the stick points to a murderer on the Triangle Bar."

Shan moved over to the door and opened it. "I think we're goin' to bust 'em up," he said. "With maybe not even a half-size war. I'm ridin' to town now. You look after things while I'm gone. An' send Sam or one of the boys over to watch the García house, in case Canuto shows up there to see Mela."

He had left his horse tied by the front gate. He found that Mary Lou was waiting beside it when he went out.

Her eyes were anxious as she turned them up to his and laid a hand on his arm. "No trouble tonight, Shan?"

He shook his head. "An errand I want to do myself, that's all. I'll be back by midnight."

She sighed deeply, sounding worried and frightened, and he had an aching longing to put his arms around her.

He smiled and reached out a hand and touched her soft hair lightly. "You are a stubborn little devil!"

"You're darned right I am! I'm in the habit of getting what I want."

MELA'S eyes flew open in the dark, her heart pounding hard with fright. She reached out a hand to the crib beside her bed, and felt that her little daughter was sleeping soundly.

Then the noise came again, real enough, a sharp rapping on the window by the head of her bed. For a moment she cowered under the covers, then when the rapping was repeated, she sat up cautiously.

There was no moon, but the starlight was so bright that she could plainly see the man's figure silhouetted outside the window. She knew it was Canuto.

Mela had loved with all her passionate Spanish heart a grey-eyed Saddlehorn cowboy, but he had not wanted to marry her, and out of bitter hurt and angry pride she had married Canuto instead. Never to anyone, except the *padre,* had she admitted that she had made a mistake. She would try to make Canuto a good wife, and some day love would come to ease the constant ache of sorrow in her heart.

Now he pounded on the window again, and in sudden fear that her parents, sleeping in the next room, would hear him, she slipped on her robe and opened the window.

Canuto swung a leg over the sill and crawled in; then he turned and pulled down the shade. He struck a match, held it high, sighted the lamp on the table, and lighted it.

"Where have you been?" Mela asked him.

He grinned proudly. "Albuquerque!" He had a paper bundle under his arm. "For you," he said. "Look at it!"

Mela hesitated. There was reluctance in her fingers as they untied the knot and let the package fall open on the bed. It was a new dress, pretty and expensive.

Mela sat down suddenly on the edge of the bed. "Canuto," she begged, "please tell me! Papa says money, and a gun, were stolen off of Señor McCroy's body by the man who killed him. You wouldn't—"

"You ask too many question!" he said good-humoredly. "I don' keel him—no! Now you feel better? Tonight I want you to write a letter for me." He pulled a couple of folded sheets of writing paper and a stubby pencil out of his pocket.

He shoved the pencil into her hand. "Write what I tell you!"

"Who is this letter to, Canuto?"

He grinned craftily. "That ees a secret tc me! You jus' write, like thees: 'Mister —You will please leave for me five thousan' dollars—under the beeg rock by wheech you were standing when you shoot Señor McCroy—tomorrow at midnight. You don' do thees—I will tell the Shereef who kill Señor McCroy!'"

"Canuto, listen! You are my husband. I've tried hard to please you. Don't do this terrible thing—and I'll try harder. I'll do anything you ask, but I can't do this. Señor McCroy was like a second father to me."

"You will write that letter!" he said.

Without further protest she took the pencil and wrote the words he dictated. When she had finished, she laid down the pencil.

He tucked the note inside his pants.

The smile in his eyes was meant to be loving—but to the girl it was suddenly more horrible, more terrifying than his anger had been. She backed away from him, around the table, then as he followed, still with that same smile on his face, she cried out wildly, "Papa! Papa—come quick!"

The door into the next room opened as if Benedito had been listening, waiting for this signal. He carried a sixgun.

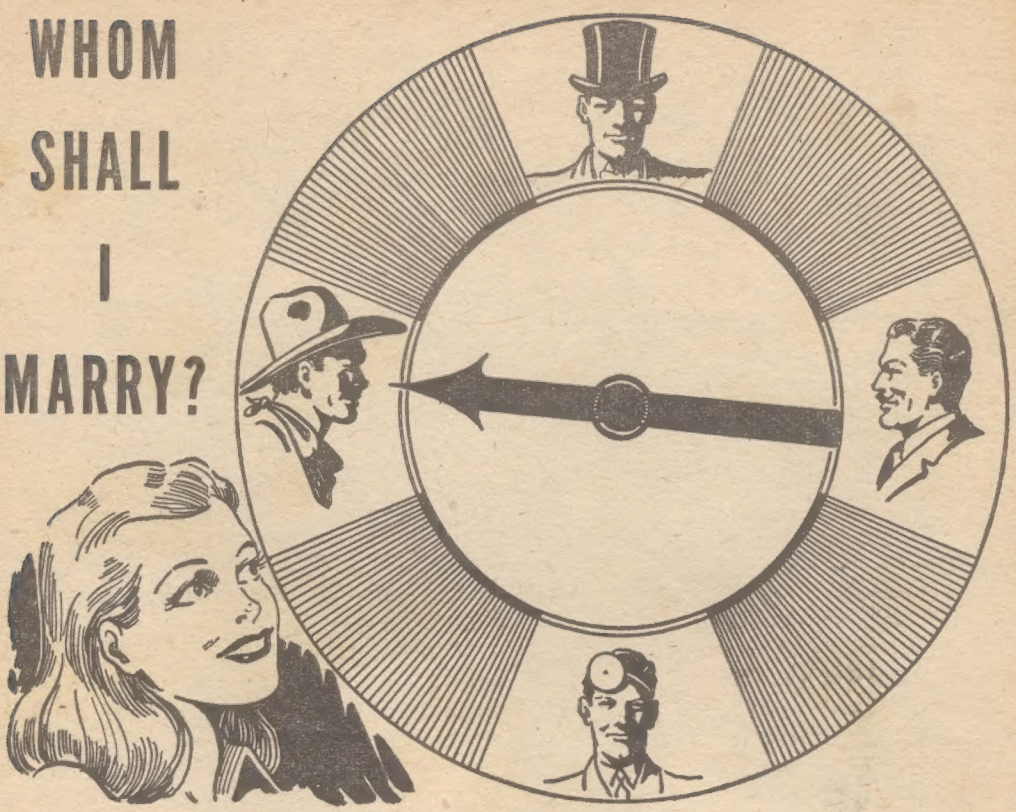
"Let him go, Papa!" Mela said to him. "Don't shoot! Please!"

"Get out, then," Benedito said. *"Pronto!"*

Canuto was no coward, but right now life was sweet, and there would be plenty of time later to avenge hot Spanish pride. With a last malevolent look that warned Mela he would some day make her pay for this, he crawled out the window.

(To be continued in the next issue)

WHOM SHALL I MARRY?



By Professor Marcus Mari

Man of Libra — *Sept. 23 to Oct. 23*

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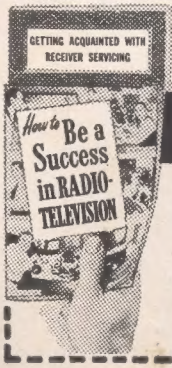

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